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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME IX

AD MARCEL

"SHE BEHELD ANOTHER FACE"

Page 443

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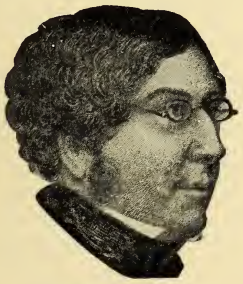
The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Venetia Trelawney

Volume IV

The Mysteries of the Court of London



Privately Printed
For Members of
The Oxford Society
London Boston

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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FIRST

It was about ten o'clock at night, and the sky was covered with dark clouds which were borne swiftly along upon the wings of a strong wind. Every now and then the moonbeams shone forth for a few moments from amidst those sombre and variable curtains which nature had stretched over the empyrean arch, but during the intervals, when the planet of the night was veiled behind those clouds, a total darkness prevailed in Geneva and the surrounding country.

Though in the middle of April, it was a tempestuous night, and the immense lake was lashed by the wind into rolling billows, so that the sound of its murmurings, moanings, and plashings might be heard to a considerable distance. Altogether it was such a night that no person would care to be abroad unless on urgent business or in pursuit of those evil avocations which were congenial with the hour and the darkness, and yet a female form was proceeding rapidly along that narrow road which ran through the fields at the back of the villa.

Closely enveloped in her capacious mantle, and with a thick veil drawn over her countenance, Mrs. Ranger it was whom we find thus daring the inclemency of the night. Quick was her pace as she proceeded in the direction of the city, on gaining the streets of which she at once took the

nearest way to the abode of Doctor Maravelli. This individual, in consequence of certain intimations received from Mrs. Ranger, had been holding himself in readiness for three or four days past to be summoned at a moment's notice on the secret and delicate business for which he had been duly retained. Mrs. Ranger therefore found him at home and prepared to accompany her forthwith.

Before they set out, however, Mrs. Ranger bound a silk handkerchief over the doctor's eyes. Then, with every appearance of the most solemn earnestness, she said, "I now adjure you, by the oath you have already taken, not to move this bandage from your eyes, nor allow it to shift its position without at once informing me."

"I repeat the oath I have previously given you," said the doctor. "No sentiment of idle curiosity ever animates me. Besides, apart from this bandage, the blackness of the night is such that if the clue were once lost to the route we are about to take, it would be impossible to distinguish or recognize any specific locality, even were I not blindfolded at all."

Mrs. Ranger made no response, but taking the doctor's hand, she led him forth from his house. On emerging thence, she conducted him up one street and down another, so that he might at least believe that she was sincere in her expressed desire that he should remain utterly in the dark as to his ultimate destination. On the other hand, Doctor Maravelli, in spite of his repudiation of any undue curiosity, had all along resolved to ascertain, if possible, not only the house to which he was to be taken, but also who his patient might be. That she was a lady of rank he had naturally concluded, not only from the apparent pains taken to hush up the consequences of her frailty, but also from the liberality with which he was paid for his services. Being a thoroughly unprincipled man, greedily avaricious on the one hand, and an inveterate gambler on the other, his fingers were ever itching for the contact of that precious coin which, by a strange idiosyncrasy, he would lavish again in profusion at the gaming-table. His profession was eminently lucrative, but his habits made him ever needy; and thus, although well paid to keep his oath inviolate in the present instance, he nevertheless from the very first made up his mind to penetrate it if possible, so that when the honour of his fair

patient was placed at his mercy he might avail himself of the secret for future extortions.

The reader has now obtained a full insight into the character of Doctor Maravelli. But it must not be thought that Mrs. Ranger herself was entirely ignorant on the same head. No such thing. When her artfully pursued researches for a doctor first brought Maravelli's name to her knowledge, she made the fullest inquiries into his character, and thence was it she ascertained, as we have heard her inform Agatha, that he was just the very person suited for the aims they had in view. Thus was Mrs. Ranger well aware that the doctor would endeavour to penetrate the present mystery, and it was entirely in accordance with her own secret plan that he should do so, — that is to say, to a certain extent. Had she been really serious in her expressed desire to prevent him from ascertaining whither he was now being led, she would not have contented herself with merely fastening a bandage over his eyes and binding him by oath not to remove it. She would have taken some other steps and have multiplied her precautions, so as to ensure the effectual maintenance of the mystery.

However, to continue the thread of our narrative, we may observe that the doctor, believing Mrs. Ranger to be positively sincere in all her precautions, laughed in his sleeve at the idea of being simply blindfolded and then led up and down two or three streets, as if a man who had dwelt all his life in Geneva could not follow by memory alone the windings and turnings along which he was thus conducted. But even if he felt any doubt upon this subject, he had only to raise the bandage from his eyes very stealthily with one hand while Mrs. Ranger led him by the other, and in one of those intervals when the moon darted forth its beams from behind a cloud could he distinguish the route by which he was being conducted.

Not a word was spoken between Mrs. Ranger and the doctor while she was guiding him up and down three or four streets, as already observed, but when she had led him out of the city and they were proceeding hand in hand along the road through the fields, Maravelli broke the silence by saying, " And so, madam, the crisis has at length come? "

" Yes," answered Mrs. Ranger, " my friend, the lady in whom I am so deeply interested, was seized with all the

premonitory symptoms of approaching maternity soon after nine o'clock this evening, and, judging from the experience which I myself have had in those matters, I think I can safely promise that you will not be detained long at the house to which I am about to conduct you, but that all will be over in a very short time."

A few more observations in a similar strain passed between Mrs. Ranger and the doctor, but it is not worth while to record them. We must, however, observe that as they were proceeding along the road, Maravelli raised the bandage, and by the light of the transient moonbeams discovered the path which they were pursuing. He immediately suspected that he was being led to the villa. He knew that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales dwelt with her suite at that place, and if his patient were indeed an inmate of those walls, he could well understand wherefore the utmost pains should be adopted to hush the matter up.

On reaching the garden wall which looked upon the road, Mrs. Ranger immediately opened the private door by means of a key which she had with her, and conducting the doctor inside the enclosure, she said, in a low but impressive whisper, " Not a word, not a syllable, every possible precaution is now needful."

Maravelli pressed her hand significantly, as much as to imply that she had no need to apprehend any thoughtlessness on his part, and while she conducted him through the garden, another glimpse stealthily obtained from under the bandage showed him it was indeed within the precincts of the villa that he had been introduced. Delighted at the adventure, Maravelli inwardly resolved that it should prove a profitable one for him.

The back entrance into the villa was now reached, and Mrs. Ranger led the doctor up that private staircase which has been already more than once alluded to in preceding chapters. The passage on the second story was speedily reached, and as Mrs. Ranger hurried Maravelli along, a door at the end was noiselessly opened, and a head was thrust forth. This was Mrs. Hubbard, whose listening ears had caught the sounds of footsteps, slight and scarcely audible though they were; but the instant she thus looked forth to satisfy her curiosity, Mrs. Ranger made a rapid gesture with the hand, and the laundress accordingly

retreated into her chamber, closing the door as gently as possible.

The next moment Mrs. Ranger conducted the doctor into the apartment occupied by Agatha Owen.

Here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for the moment, in order to explain certain details with which it is necessary to make the reader acquainted.

It was eleven o'clock — about a quarter of an hour after Mrs. Ranger and Maravelli had entered the villa — when a post-chaise, drawn by four horses, issued forth from Geneva by that same secluded road which ran through the fields, and which has been so frequently mentioned in recent chapters. On arriving within about a hundred yards of the villa, the equipage stopped, and three men leaped forth from the interior. Bidding the postilions wait patiently, they proceeded on foot along the road until they reached the boundary wall of the garden, and then stopping short, they appeared to expect some arrival which was to guide their next proceedings.

In a few minutes the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas arrived on horseback, and, dismounting from their animals, they fastened the bridles to the bough of a tree at a distance of about fifty yards from the villa.

The nobleman and the colonel were enveloped in travelling cloaks, and seemed prepared for a somewhat lengthy journey during the night. Without delay — the moment they dismounted from their steeds — they repaired to the spot where the three individuals already mentioned were waiting; and we may at once observe that these persons were none others than the fishers of men, — Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

"You are punctual," said the earl, immediately addressing them in a low tone and speaking in the French language. "This looks businesslike."

"You will find the whole matter conducted as nicely, as noiselessly, and as expeditiously as you could wish," responded Kobolt. "Show us where it is likely the fair ones will be in a few minutes, and leave the rest to us."

"Here," said the Earl of Curzon, indicating a particular part of the wall against which stood the stump of a tree, as was revealed to the eyes of the three men by the moon-

beams which shot forth at the instant, " this is where you would do well to scale the barrier and enter the enclosure. The lady will be walking in one of the avenues close by, but the moment she hears the sound of footsteps she will hasten toward you. Then seize upon her, gag her, reck not for her struggle or resistance — "

" Ay, ay," said Kobolt, " we understand all that. Leave us to manage the carrying-off part of the business. Now, sir," he added, turning toward Colonel Malpas, " which part of the grounds are we to enter for your lady? "

" We must proceed a little farther on," answered Malpas. Then having led the way to a point below the garden door, he said, " Here, this is the place, and I have only to repeat the same instructions which my comrade has already given you: namely, that the moment the lady accosts you, which she will do, you must pounce upon her, and seal her lips with your hand — "

" But no unnecessary violence with either," interjected the Earl of Curzon. " No damage to the sweet lips and the beautiful teeth — "

" Trust us, we will be as gentle as lambs in carrying off the fair ones," interrupted Kobolt. " No further instructions are necessary. We know what to do. You can mount your horses, and away with you on the road to Lausanne. In less than a quarter of an hour we shall be on the same track, with the ladies in the carriage, that is to say, provided they keep the appointments, as you, gentlemen, have stated."

" There is no fear of it," remarked the Earl of Curzon. " At all events, I can safely answer for one."

" And I for the other," rejoined Malpas.

The nobleman and the colonel now left the three desperadoes to execute the work entrusted to them, and returning to the spot where they had left their horses, they remounted the animals, and galloping away, took the broad open road leading along the shore of the crescent-shaped lake toward Lausanne.

CHAPTER II

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE SECOND

We must now peep into the bedchamber belonging to Miss Emma Owen, and there, at about the same time the preceding incidents were taking place, we shall find that young lady and her sister Julia in close and earnest conference together.

They were seated together upon a sofa, and the wax candles, which stood upon the elegant toilet-table, shed their light upon the animated countenances of the two sisters and were reflected in their sparkling eyes. Having laid aside the handsome dresses which constituted the evening costume fitted for the dining-table and drawing-room of their royal mistress, they had put on loose wrappers, the negligence of which and the soft abandonment of the whole form which they seemed to indicate invested these lovely but dissolute girls with an air of voluptuous languor. Nevertheless their features, as we have just observed, were animated with the glow of excitement and with a certain agitation of the feelings.

"This is truly provoking, Emma," said the sentimental Julia. "What is to be done?"

"My dear girl, I have already told you," returned her sister with a laugh, "that we must deprive ourselves of the company of our lovers for this night. When we made each our respective appointments, we did not foresee that Agatha would so soon — But, no matter, you know, Julia, what we have to do, and Mrs. Ranger may come any moment to fetch us. Therefore we must be here in readiness to attend her summons without a single instant's delay."

"I am aware of all that," said Julia, pouting. "But surely I can be spared just for one moment, to meet Curzon

and make some excuse for not introducing him into my own chamber to-night? "

" And why should I not feel an equal anxiety to do the same toward Malpas? " asked Emma. Then, without waiting for a reply, she said, somewhat impatiently, " No, my dear Julia, we must do nothing that can possibly injure the even tenor and the safe progress of matters elsewhere. It is sufficient that Mrs. Ranger has this moment introduced the doctor into the house, without our running out and in to chat with our lovers. Only fancy what troubles might ensue if any disturbance were created or any exposure took place, through thoughtlessness or carelessness on our part."

" But I do not mean — I do not propose for an instant," exclaimed Julia, " that we should bring in Curzon or Malpas to-night. What I meant was, that as we have each given our lovers an appointment, and as they will be sure to keep it, it will be better that we should just hasten to them, if only for a moment, so as to prevent them from lounging about in the gardens, not only at the risk of being discovered, but also at that of encountering each other."

" I again protest against such a proceeding on our parts," said Emma. " Agatha is now in the pains of labour, and Mrs. Ranger has just stealthily introduced the doctor to her apartment. Presently there will be more goings-out. Why should we increase the number of these movements backward and forward, and thus run a risk of creating an alarm? Suppose that such alarm be created, the princess herself might come forth from her own chamber to ascertain what was the matter, and then Mrs. Hubbard would see at once that it is not her Royal Highness who is this night becoming a mother and for whom the doctor has been so secretly smuggled into the villa. Nay, more, it might be discovered that Agatha was thus giving birth to a child — "

" Yes, yes," said Julia, nervously, " I perceive full well that too much precaution on our part cannot be exercised."

" Now you are speaking reasonably," exclaimed Emma. " Besides, have you not told Curzon that whenever you fail to be punctual at the place of meeting, he is to conclude that something has transpired to prevent you from keeping the appointment? "

" Oh, yes, I have invariably given him that warning," replied Julia. " Indeed, I have always begged and implored

that he would not remain five minutes beyond the appointed hour."

"And I have spoken in the same terms to Malpas," remarked Emma. "There is consequently nothing to fear. When they find that we do not join them, they will take their departure each by his own special route, instead of lingering in the grounds."

"The worst of it is," said Julia, still in a tone of deep regret, "that I told Curzon so positively I would meet him to-night, no matter what weather it might be — "

"And I gave an equally serious promise to the colonel," interrupted Emma. "But they both know full well, or at least must suppose, that we are not altogether our own mistresses, but to a considerable extent are dependent on the will, if not the caprice, of her Royal Highness. And after all, I have no doubt that Curzon on the one hand, and Malpas on the other, only wish to renew their mingled persuasions, entreaties, and threats, to induce us to run away with them. As if I," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily, and thus unconsciously displaying to full advantage the two rows of brilliant teeth which adorned her mouth, "as if I would ever compromise myself so far as to elope with a married man, — a colonel who has sold his commission, — a mere fashionable dangler, without a shilling in his pocket. No, no, Malpas is good-looking, and is therefore all very well as a lover in secret — And you, Julia," added Emma, suddenly interrupting herself to fix her attention upon her sister, "you surely would not be foolish enough to run away with Curzon, — an insolvent nobleman steeped to the very lips in debt, and who would abandon you the moment he was sated with your beauties or felt you to be a burden on his finances?"

"Do you — do you really think," asked Julia, with tremulous voice and hesitating manner, "that Curzon is so selfish, so unprincipled?"

"Of course, all men are," rejoined Emma, decisively, as if there could be no doubt relative to the truth of her averment. "Curzon and Malpas have most probably left England to avoid their debts and duns, or else why should they have been travelling in a humble manner — "

"You forget, Emma," interrupted her sister, "that we are not aware in what manner our lovers were travelling

before they fell in with us at Milan. In fact, it was thence that Curzon followed me in so secret and stealthy a manner, and the same may be said of the proceedings of Malpas toward yourself."

"Well," exclaimed Emma, "there is no doubt that they have hitherto been infatuated with regard to us, and if they were single men, with good fortunes, we might inveigle them into the matrimonial noose. As it is, things are quite different, they are both married, and both notoriously hampered in their finances. Very certain is it, then, that I do not intend to ruin myself for ever by an elopement with Malpas, and I sincerely hope that you are equally well resolved with regard to Curzon? You do not answer me, Julia — "

"I confess that I am not altogether indifferent to the earl's handsome person and agreeable manners," remarked Julia. Then, with a sudden assumption of firmness and decision, she said, "But I agree with you, sister. It would be the height of folly to elope with a married man who does not possess a fortune as an indemnification for the other drawbacks of his position. Very clear, however, is it that I shall now soon lose Curzon altogether," added Julia, with a profound sigh.

"And are there no other lovers in the world to be obtained?" demanded Emma, impatiently. "Julia, my dear girl, without flattery let me assure you that you are handsomer than ever, and you need not fear that you will long remain without such sweet solace as you require, even though Curzon should abandon you to-morrow. For my part, I mean to tell Malpas plainly enough that if he annoys me with any further entreaties to elope with him, he had better depart altogether; for though I like him very well as a lover, I am not prepared to submit to him as a dictator."

"What can Curzon mean," asked Julia, "by constantly hinting that I ought to give him my fullest confidence, that I should keep no secrets from him, that I should unbosom myself altogether — "

"Oh, Malpas talks to me in precisely the same strain," interrupted Emma, petulantly, "as I have told you over and over again. But this is the way with all men who seek to persuade a woman into a particular course. Here, Curzon on the one hand and Malpas on the other are seeking to

worm themselves altogether into our confidence. They know that ladies in our position are acquainted with many little secrets connected with the royal personages, and so on, and they think that by breaking down every barrier of reserve, they establish a greater familiarity, a deeper intimacy, and thus render themselves indispensably necessary to us."

"But all this must arise," said Julia, "from — from —"

"Love, you would say?" exclaimed Emma. "No, it is a temporary infatuation on their part. Without vanity, we may declare ourselves to be two very fine girls. We have everything in our favour, and it is no wonder that Curzon and Malpas, sheer voluptuaries in their hearts, should be for a season captivated by our beauty and enchained by our fascinations. Besides, the whole adventure has for them a mystery which increases its charm to an ineffable degree. But once let Malpas have me altogether to himself, dwelling with him as his mistress, constantly with him from morning to night, or let the same take place with you and Curzon, and the result will speedily show how fickle and inconstant man can soon become wearied of the most beautiful woman."

"There is a great deal of truth in what you say," remarked Julia, evidently much struck by her sister's observations. "Therefore, solemnly and emphatically do I assure you that, happen what may, I will not suffer myself to be persuaded to elope with Lord Curzon. And now tell me, Emma, has it never struck you as singular that the earl and the colonel should not have once met? For if they had, the one would have told me and the other would have told you — "

"As a matter of course they would avoid such an encounter, even if they were to behold each other from a distance," interrupted Emma, "for as they are each living under a false name, humbly, obscurely, and even mysteriously, they would of course avoid a meeting which would either render explanations necessary, or else, by the refusal of them, leave a singular impression upon each other's mind. No, I do not for a moment suppose that they have met, for even when coming to the villa at night to keep their appointments respectively with you and me, they have to take separate paths in order to reach the distinct points

where we thus encounter them, and if one heard the footsteps of the other, he would of course try to get out of his way. Thus when two men, though in reality well acquainted with each other, — as we know that the earl and the colonel were in London, — have each a distinct, separate, and special reason for preserving an *incognito* at some place afar from home, I believe that they may succeed in doing so for months, and even years, to such an extent that the one shall not even have an idea of the presence of the other in the same city."

"I can assure you, Emma," said Julia, "that my lover is most heartily tired of preserving this *incognito*."

"And mine also," responded Emma. "But as I have before told you, there are other good-looking and amorously disposed young men in the world, and amongst the foreign noblemen and gentlemen who visit at the villa I have seen more than one who would compensate me for the loss of Malpas. Let our two present lovers go, then, and the sooner the better, if their infatuation becomes a positive persecution toward ourselves. They have answered our purpose in a double sense. They have suited us as gallants in a pretty little intrigue, and they have aided us in fulfilling the behest of our friends in England. We have made them our dupes, our agents, and our instruments in the ramifications of conspiracy, as well as our paramours in the transports of love. From the very first moment that Malpas began to demonstrate peculiar and unmistakable attentions to me at Milan did I perceive how it would be possible to render him useful in the grand designs which we were appointed to carry out. You also, on your side, Julia, foresaw the same result with regard to Curzon, and within the last few days our foreknowledge in those respects has been amply justified. Truly Mrs. Ranger is a very, very clever woman, for to her is due all the credit of the idea involving the princess's ermine cloak and green silk hood."

"Yes, and to her also," added Julia, "may be attributed the idea of putting Mrs. Hubbard on the watch."

"'Twas excellent," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily. "But what shall we say of that other idea for which we are indebted to the splendid invention of Mrs. Ranger?" she asked, significantly.

" What, your dressing up in male apparel, with a pair of false whiskers and mustachios? " said Julia, laughing in her turn.

" Now did I not, when thus dressed up, personate Bergami to perfection? " exclaimed Emma, as if the tremendous phase to which she was now alluding, in the hideous conspiracy whereof she and her sisters were the instruments, could be made an object of triumph and self-felicitation. " Worthy Mrs. Ranger has indeed managed uncommonly well, for whenever I was performing the part of Bergami, and when appearing to steal so cautiously along the passage, Mrs. Ranger always compelled the observant Mrs. Hubbard to retreat from her prying position at her chamber door the moment that I reached the entrance into the princess's apartment. Ah! little thought the scandal-loving laundress that the Bergami she thus saw was but a false one, after all, merely Miss Emma Owen dressed up to resemble the handsome equerry, and that, so far from ever penetrating into her Royal Highness's apartment in such a guise and at such an hour of the night, I stole hastily back to my own the instant I knew the said Mrs. Hubbard was no longer peeping forth at the end of the passage."

" There can be no doubt," said Julia, " that we are doing our best to fulfil the instructions of those who placed us about the person of her Royal Highness."

" Especially within the last few days," said Emma, " have we managed to heap together an immense amount of circumstantial evidence tending to criminate the princess, and now, the proceedings of this night will tend to crown them all."

" Yes," added Julia, " for good Mrs. Ranger has done her best to confirm Mrs. Hubbard in the belief that 'tis the princess herself who is about to become a mother, and thus is the web rapidly closing in around the unconscious and I must say undeserving and much-to-be-pitied wife of the prince regent."

" Ah! if we were all well-off, rich, and independent, you, I, and Agatha," observed Emma, " we might then afford to show pity and forbearance toward one of our own sex; but we dare not, no, we dare not, Julia. We must continue to steel our hearts against her, even as we have already hardened them. Methought that her Royal Highness was

never so amiable, never so kind, never so truly affable and winning as when this morning, surrounded by her ladies, she chatted so familiarly with us all. Then for a moment did my heart quiver, and strange feelings pass over me, as a sense of the treacherous part which I was enacting struck keenly and acutely upon my soul. But I stifled the sensation, trampled it, as it were, underfoot — "

" Say no more, sister," cried Julia, with evident trepidation. " That is a feeling which I myself have also experienced more than once, ay, many, many times, and I cannot bear to think of it. But I wonder whether Curzon and Malpas are still waiting there, or whether they are gone," she suddenly observed, in order to change the conversation. " 'Tis past eleven o'clock," she added, glancing at the timepiece which stood upon the mantel.

" Yes, more than a quarter past," observed Emma, " and as our appointments were respectively fixed for eleven punctually, it is not likely that our lovers are waiting still. I wonder how long it will be before we are summoned to Agatha's room."

" And I wonder how Agatha herself, poor girl! is getting on," added Julia, a sudden shade appearing upon her countenance. " What if anything fatal were to happen to her? " she inquired, with a chill shudder passing visibly over her form.

" Heavens! " ejaculated Emma, catching the infection of that cold tremor, " do not meet misfortunes half-way; do not anticipate an evil that would necessitate the fullest and completest exposure."

At this moment a low but hasty knock at the door of the apartment cut short the conversation between the young ladies, and issuing gently forth, they at once proceeded to Agatha's chamber, which was precisely opposite. A small lamp was there burning, dimly and feebly, in the fireplace, but the heavy draperies were carefully drawn over the casements, so as to prevent even that faint glimmer from being observed without, it being a part of the various precautions adopted that there should be no ground, whatever might transpire thereafter, for any one to be able to affirm that there was a light seen in Agatha's chamber on this occasion.

The curtains were also drawn closely around the bed in

which Agatha lay, and she herself had her head completely enveloped in a thick black veil. But so feeble was the light that this precaution was scarcely necessary, for the room was already dark enough, and within the deeper obscurity of the couch, surrounded as it was by draperies, it would have been impossible for Maravelli, had he chosen to raise his bandage, to distinguish the features of his patient with a view to future recognition. So dull, indeed, was that light that no mere transient glance furtively thrown around the room would enable the doctor to observe its appearance in such a way as to know it again; and we may here observe that when Mrs. Ranger quitted the chamber and crossed the passage for a moment to knock at Emma's door opposite, she took the lamp with her. For be it understood that the object was to let Doctor Maravelli go forth from the villa that night with the impression that it was the Princess of Wales whom he had delivered of a child; hence the real absence of efficient precaution on the part of Mrs. Ranger when conducting him from Geneva to the villa. In plain terms, she wished him to know that it was the villa which he thus entered, but it must be obvious to the reader that she did not want him to know which room it was in the villa where his patient was confined.

With these explanatory observations we resume the thread of our history.

The moment Emma and Julia entered the chamber they beheld the doctor, with the black bandage over his eyes, seated by the side of the couch, holding Agatha's arm in such a way that he could feel her pulse. Mrs. Ranger, on speeding back into the chamber after knocking at Emma's door, had again deposited the lamp in the depth of the spacious hearth. Then, turning toward the two girls as they entered immediately after, she pointed significantly to an object upon a chair. Emma and Julia instantaneously comprehended the truth, from the expression of her countenance, for she had laid aside her cloak, bonnet, and veil, for the present. Then a few words conveyed in a hasty whisper ratified the idea which the girls had conceived. To be brief, Agatha had been delivered of a still-born child, and the tiny corpse was enveloped in a flannel ready to be taken away. Indeed, the doctor was at this moment satisfying himself, by feeling his patient's pulse and putting to

her a few brief questions, that she was in a condition that would justify him in leaving her.

Emma and Julia were slightly shocked when the well wrapped up corpse of their sister's child was thus pointed out to them, but the next moment they both experienced a feeling of satisfaction that the babe was dead; and in answer to the rapid question which they whisperingly put to Mrs. Ranger relative to Agatha's condition, they were still more rejoiced on learning that she was progressing favourably.

Now, then, came the moment for these young ladies to play the part already arranged for them, and which was a contrivance admirably adapted to display the diabolical ingenuity of Mrs. Ranger, — a contrivance invested with an air so natural and so perfectly genuine that it was indeed but too well calculated to make the desired impression upon Doctor Maravelli's mind, namely, that it was the royal mistress of that villa who was his patient now.

The moment those few whispered words already alluded to had been exchanged between the sisters and Mrs. Ranger, the two young ladies advanced quickly toward the couch, and as if labouring under the excitement of the sincerest feelings of devotion and love, they threw themselves upon their knees, seizing Agatha's hand and pressing it by turns to their lips. Then, as if hurried away by excess of emotion, Emma murmured, " Oh, dearest, dearest princess! "

" Beloved princess! " added Julia, also in accents that seemed characteristic of the most genuine excitement.

At the same instant Mrs. Ranger darted forward, as if perfectly horrified at the expressions which had just fallen from the young ladies' lips, and with a quick " Hush! hush! " which seemed to denote a terrible perturbation on her part.

Nothing of all this was lost upon the doctor. Without understanding English, the word princess, as just pronounced by the young ladies' lips, was quite intelligible to him, — the French word being very nearly the same; and then the sudden flurry into which Mrs. Ranger seemed to be thrown, and her apparent eagerness to prevent any further ebullition of the feelings on their part, naturally confirmed Maravelli's belief that the patient whom he had been brought hither under such mysterious circumstances to attend upon could be none other than the Princess of Wales.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE THIRD

Thus far all the plans, plots, and machinations of Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen, relative to the proceeding of this memorable night, were crowned with success. But now the curtain was about to rise upon a new phase in the intricately woven and strangely ramified performance.

Emma and Julia had been brought into their sister's room on the present occasion for two reasons. The first was to enact the little scene with the description of which we closed the preceding chapter; the second was to keep watch upon Maravelli for the few moments during which Mrs. Ranger was now compelled to absent herself from the apartment.

Hastily threading the passage, the wily woman repaired to the chamber occupied by Mrs. Hubbard, who had not retired to rest. Indeed, the light burning upon the table showed the liveliest curiosity, mingled with an air of much mystery and importance, on the features of the laundress, and the moment Mrs. Ranger entered the room, she rushed forward, exclaiming, quickly, "Wal, mem, be it all over?"

"Yes, all, and well over, too," answered Mrs. Ranger, significantly. "The child is dead."

"Dead!" ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard, holding up her arms with an affectation of dismay. "The poor leetle hinnocent lambkin of a babby!"

"There is nothing to regret," said Mrs. Ranger, speaking quickly. "It is much better it should be so."

"Wal, so it be, mem," observed Mrs. Hubbard, "and I always thought what a blessin' it would be if as how the egspected little un should hop the twig, as they say of the dear little birds — But," she cried, suddenly interrupting

herself, for she saw that her visitant was looking somewhat impatient, "if so be there is anythink I can do — "

"Well, my dear good woman," said Mrs. Ranger, "this is precisely the reason that has brought me hither. For as I have considered you deserving of my confidence, and regarding you as a discreet, well-behaved, and prudent woman, I have not hesitated to trust you hitherto, and am going to trust you still further now — There, pray don't interrupt me, but listen. The child is dead and must be taken hence at once. The doctor is ready to depart — "

"Marmajelly, mem?" said Mrs. Hubbard, in inquiring allusion to the doctor's name.

"Yes, Maravelli," answered Mrs. Ranger, quickly. "He is ready to depart, and I must conduct him back to the city, because, as you beheld him when you peeped forth from your room ere now, he is blindfolded. He will take charge of the corpse, he will dispose of it. But while descending the stairs and threading the garden, there may be some risk of being observed, and if a strange man were thus seen within the precincts of the villa, an alarm would be raised, he would be arrested, and then if the corpse were discovered — You understand me, you can guess the service I require at your hands? That staircase," she added, hastily, pointing to the one in the corner of the room, "leads up into the laundry, and from the laundry there is another means of communication down into the garden. Is it not so? Good. Will you, then, take charge of the dead child, steal forth, make the circuit of the grounds, and meet me and the doctor at the door opening in the garden wall on the road through the fields?"

Mrs. Hubbard, who felt herself suddenly elevated to a very high pedestal of importance by being thus admitted into what she supposed to be a stupendous secret regarding the honour of the Princess of Wales, at once consented to render the service required at her hands. Thereupon Mrs. Ranger left her for a few moments, and as she went down the passage, extinguished the light burning there, so as to prevent Mrs. Hubbard from noticing which room it was she entered, in case the worthy woman should think fit to peep through the keyhole.

On reëntering Agatha's chamber again, Mrs. Ranger, who was assuredly as indefatigable as she was astute for all

purposes of evil, made a hasty sign indicative that all was right, and this was promptly understood by Emma and Julia, who were now standing by the side of the bed, closely watching Maravelli. Taking up the corpse of the child, Mrs. Ranger hurried back to the apartment of the laundress, to whom she immediately consigned the light but somewhat repulsive burden. Then having seen Mrs. Hubbard, who had previously huddled on a cloak and bonnet, disappear with the object entrusted to her up the staircase to the laundry, Mrs. Ranger sped back to Agatha's chamber. Here she once more resumed her own cloak, bonnet, and thick veil. Then, taking Maravelli's hand, she led him forth with the same appearance of profound and mysterious precaution which she had observed when introducing him thither three-quarters of an hour previously.

Conducting him down the secret staircase, out of the villa, into the garden, she put in his hands a purse which gave forth that golden chink so pleasing to his ears, and at the same time she said to him, in a low whisper, " You have not been detained long."

" No," responded the doctor, in an equally subdued tone. " I should not mind having a similar adventure every night of my life."

They now continued to advance in silence. The gardens were threaded, and the back gate was reached. Mrs. Hubbard was not there. Mrs. Ranger and the doctor accordingly waited five minutes.

" Wherefore did we not bring the corpse with us? " he asked. " It would have been much better."

" I was fearful that if you should happen to be observed and an alarm should be created," responded Mrs. Ranger, " the most serious peril might ensue. But I have entrusted the child to a woman in whom I can rely. She will be here in a moment; she cannot possibly be long. Hark! I hear footsteps. Perhaps she cannot find her way through the darkness of the night. Stay you here; I will go and meet her."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Ranger relinquished the doctor's hand, and proceeded some twenty yards in the direction where she had heard footsteps moving. But just at the instant that a ray of moonshine gleamed from behind a cloud, shadowing forth her form cloaked and veiled as it

was, she was startled by an abrupt spring, as if a wild beast were bounding through the trees, and so suddenly was she seized upon by the strong arms of a man that a dread consternation paralyzed her very tongue, thus preventing her from giving utterance to the faintest cry. The next instant she was gagged by a piece of linen, or handkerchief, being thrust into her mouth. Then, quick as thought, the ruffian who had thus made her captive lifted her in his strong arms, and bore her as if she were a mere child to a garden seat that stood against the wall. On this he jumped with marvellous agility, and over the wall he at once tossed her as unceremoniously as if she were a bundle of rags. The shriek that sprang up in her throat was stifled by the gag thrust into her mouth, but instead of falling to the ground, she was caught in the arms of another individual, who at once scud along the road with his living burden to where a post-chaise was waiting at a little distance, and the outlines of which appeared to her view just as the moonbeams were vanishing again. The next moment and Mrs. Ranger was flung into the vehicle as coolly and comfortably as she had been ere now tossed over the wall, and on being thus tumbled headlong inside the chaise, she pitched against another female, who gave vent to a sudden ejaculation in the pain caused by the concussion.

"Heavens! 'tis you, Mrs. Hubbard?" said Mrs. Ranger, relieving herself from the gag the moment her hands were free again, for she instantaneously recognized the voice of the laundress. Then, in quick, breathless, and scarcely audible accents, she said, "But the child?"

"Dropped in the garden," responded Mrs. Hubbard, "when a coarse, wulgar furriner seized on me in the selvidgest manner possible and sent me flying over the wall jest for all the world like a battling-dore and shuttling-cock."

"Ah! 'twas the same with me," answered Mrs. Ranger. "But the child — what will happen now?"

"Gracious goodness on'y knows. Heavins, mem, what trouble you have brought me into!" and Mrs. Hubbard fell to moaning and sobbing as if her heart would break.

The preceding colloquy only occupied a few moments, and even if it had not been cut short by Mrs. Hubbard's whimpering, it would have been at the very same moment

by the entrance of one of the men into the vehicle. The door was then banged, his two companions leaped upon the box, the postilions cracked their whips, and away sped the equipage in the direction of the highroad leading to Lausanne.

Meanwhile, Doctor Maravelli, hearing the tread of several footsteps, the sounds of voices, and then the galloping off of a post-chaise along the road skirting the back of the villa, was seized with nervous misgivings, and finding that his veiled guide returned not, but that all was still around, he felt convinced that something most unexpected and mysterious had occurred, and not knowing to what dangers he himself might be exposed, he hastened to scale the wall and beat a precipitate retreat back to his own house at Geneva.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FOURTH

It was about half-past two o'clock in the morning when the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas pushed their jaded steeds up the acclivitous steep of the main thoroughfare of Lausanne.

The night, or, rather, the morning, was pitch-dark, for the moon had totally disappeared, and the sky was curtained with masses of sable drapery, as if nature had hung the empyrean arch with a funeral pall. Nor did the dimly burning oil-lamps of Lausanne do much more than render that darkness visible. Nevertheless, without setting forth the salient features of the place, they served to guide our travellers to the hotel at which it had previously been arranged that they were to take up their quarters.

The porter of the establishment at once gave them admission, and as alacrity always prevails in a Continental hotel when Englishmen make their appearance, their repute being that of wealthy and liberal-paying travellers, the earl and the colonel had no difficulty in obtaining all requisite comforts even at that unseasonable hour. A groom was promptly in readiness to take charge of the horses, and a waiter was summoned to conduct them to an apartment, where a blazing fagot on the hearth, wax lights on the mantel, and a cold repast quickly spread upon the table, soon gave an air of luxurious comfort to a room which a few minutes before had been enwrapped in the darkness, the silence, and the chilliness of the hour.

These arrangements being made with that expedition for which Continental waiters in general and Swiss ones in particular are so remarkable, the earl proceeded to give a few hasty but clearly expressed instructions.

" Waiter," he said, slipping a couple of gold pieces into the man's hand, " listen to what I have to say. My friend and myself of course require bedchambers, to which we shall not, however, immediately repair. We wait the coming of a post-chaise containing two ladies and three men, who are serving as an escort to the said ladies. So soon as the carriage arrives, you will show the whole party up into this room, and in the interval you will direct that a bedchamber be provided for the two ladies, who are sisters, and therefore will occupy the same couch. As for the three men who are coming with them, they may shift for themselves, for I know not whether they will remain or whether they will take their prompt departure again. Now you understand. So bring up a couple of bottles of champagne, by the aid of which, together with this array of eatables, my friend and I will while away the time till the carriage comes."

The waiter bowed acquiescence to all the instructions he had just received, and having served the wine that was ordered, the discreet functionary took his station in the porter's lodge to await the coming of the post-chaise.

" Well," said Curzon, as he and Malpas sat down together at the supper-table after the door had closed behind the waiter, " this is indeed a night of mingled romance and excitement. It was eleven when we left Geneva, and it was half-past two as we set foot in Lausanne. Thirty miles in three hours and a half, with such horses as those, are no bad achievement."

" On the contrary, 'twas a famous ride," remarked Malpas, as he tossed off a bumper of champagne. " It will be at least an hour before the post-chaise arrives. But should you not have passed the girls off as our wives before that waiter to whom you ere now gave such elaborate instructions? "

" No such thing," exclaimed Curzon. " It is not by any means necessary to practise the least deception in the matter. Here we are safe at Lausanne, in the Canton of Vaud, and therefore completely out of the jurisdiction of the authorities of Geneva. Even suppose that any disturbance should have been created, any exposure caused, and any pursuit instituted, nothing could be done to us. In the same way that a man seeks refuge in France against the consequence of his little irregularities in England, so may we make sure

of impunity at Lausanne for this forcible abduction which we initiated at Geneva."

"I am well aware of all that you are saying," observed Malpas. "But for the credit of the girls themselves, we might as well have passed them off as our wives, whom we could represent as preferring the luxury of a chaise to our mode of travelling on horseback."

"And when the chaise does arrive," remarked Curzon, "the waiter would think that we entrusted our wives to three of the most hangdog-looking scoundrels that ever lived. But, upon my word, you seem to have a mighty great consideration all of a sudden for the fair fame of your Emma. Come, tell me candidly, did you ever care half so much for your own wife?"

"I do not pretend to care very particularly for Emma Owen," replied Malpas, "and as for my wife, I never cared much for her."

"Perhaps you have cared more for some other man's wife?" said Curzon, suddenly surveying the colonel in so strange a manner that he turned ghastly pale, trembled visibly, and, dropping his knife and fork, sat gazing on the earl with a half-stolid, half-frightened air.

"I — I — don't — that is, I can't exactly understand you," were the words he stammered forth in broken accents. "What do you mean, Curzon?"

"I mean just this, Malpas," said the earl, now adopting a resolute aspect and decisive tone, "that inasmuch as we shall most probably part in a few hours, you to journey in one direction along with your Emma, and I to take another in company with my Julia, we may as well have a word or two of mutual explanation."

"But I do not understand you," said Malpas, plucking up as much courage as he could possibly summon to his aid.

"Well, but you must suspect what I mean," exclaimed Curzon. Then, as he deliberately produced a brace of pistols from his pocket, he said, "These weapons, with which you urged me to provide myself as a means of protection during our journey, shall send a couple of bullets into your brain unless you answer me truly and faithfully in respect to certain matters wherein you can clear up the small amount of mystery that remains unsolved and unread by me."

" Curzon, you are jesting, you are joking," stammered Malpas, turning still more deadly pale than at first, and inasmuch as the muzzles of the pistols were pointblank toward him, he shifted his chair in such a manner as to place himself beyond the limit of their range.

" Silence, and do not interrupt me! " exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, in a stern voice. Then, resuming a deliberate and measured tone, he said, " For a month past you and I have been apparently upon friendly terms together, but believe me when I say that all the while there has been such a rankling, festering, irritating spirit within me that I have often loathed myself for thus being even commonly civil to one who — But no matter, we have not time for unnecessary comment, barely sufficient for requisite explanation. Once more listen, then. We are about to separate, and before we part you must tell me everything. I need not tell you what it is that I seek to know. Your very looks at this moment are a sufficient indication that you comprehend me full well. But this I may say, tell me everything, and I will allow you to go unhurt and scatheless. I will not avenge myself on you, provided you give me the means of avenging myself on another. For, mark you," continued the earl, whose feelings had been gradually growing excited while he was thus speaking, " my wife — Ah! now you start more visibly still as I thus allude to her."

" Go on, my lord, go on," said Malpas, most painfully anxious to arrive at the end of the colloquy, so that the pistols might disappear from the table.

" As I was saying, then," resumed the earl, now speaking hurriedly, as if he were also desirous to terminate the present scene, " my wife, the moment she hears of Julia Owen's elopement with me, will be taking active steps to obtain a divorce. But I must be beforehand with her. 'Tis I who must take the initiative, or if I should be forestalled in that respect, I must at all events be enabled to turn around and retaliate with a countercharge of adultery. Now, Colonel Malpas, you understand me, and no man in the world can better than yourself give me the information which I require. Once more, then, do I enjoin you to tell me everything, the whole history of your connection with my wife, from first to last, and on that condition alone will I spare you."

As he gave utterance to the concluding words of his speech, Lord Curzon took the pistols in his hands with a threatening demeanour; and then followed a scene of deep degradation, utter humiliation, and dastard compromise on the part of Colonel Malpas. He did indeed reveal everything, entering into the minutest details of his connection with the Countess of Curzon, confessing how Lady Lechmere's agency and Gertrude's artifice had served the progress of their intrigue, how Editha had given him the forged bills, how he had led her to explain the whole transaction at Mrs. Gale's house of infamy, while Emmerson was an unseen listener, and how, after his imprisonment in the King's Bench, his threats of exposure had extorted the sum necessary for his release. In a word, all those particulars which are so well known to the reader in respect to the colonel's amour with the Countess of Curzon were now revealed by the craven wretch. The earl listened calmly and tranquilly, putting frequent leading questions when Malpas hesitated, or actually dragging forth the replies when, through very shame or fear, he occasionally stopped short.

Some further conversation took place between the earl and the colonel, but which we need not now pause to relate. Suffice it to say that Lord Curzon was himself surprised at the comparative ease with which he had thus succeeded in working upon the fears of the dastard Malpas, and this circumstance suddenly prompted him to make a further use of the cowardly fellow's present ductility of humour. In fact, the earl had a certain lingering sentiment of curiosity to gratify, and it was natural enough that he should avail himself of the influence he had acquired over the colonel's fears in order to satisfy himself on this one remaining point.

"We have now said all that we need say," he observed, "relative to the worthless woman who bears the title of my wife." Then assuming the sternest expression of countenance and pointing both the pistols direct at Malpas, he said, "Now tell me, — and beware how you give utterance to a falsehood, — tell me I say, by what means you made your peace with Lady Sackville, who at one time was so terribly embittered against you."

"On issuing from prison," replied Malpas, grovelling like a coward in the presence of those pistols, the muzzles of

which were but three feet from his head, "I wrote to her a penitent letter imploring her pardon. She sent for me to Carlton House, she proposed to me this mission in which I am now engaged, a mission similar to your own — "

"But — and now answer me with the solemn serious truth," interrupted the earl, "did she receive you with favour, did she smile upon you?"

"No, no," responded Malpas, actually writhing as he beheld the earl's fingers playing, as it were, with the triggers of the pistols, "she treated me with scorn, she seemed to regard me as a reptile."

"Ah! that is sufficient," said the earl, lowering the pistols; and, his curiosity being gratified with regard to the subject of his inquiry, he muttered, half-audibly, "I see, I understand, she made a tool of you, she treated you as a hireling agent well fitted to do her dirty work. But she should not have placed me on the same footing," and the haughty Earl of Curzon bit his lip with an evident expression of vexation.

Although so profoundly a prey to his dastard fears, the colonel did not fail to catch those words and mark that mien on the part of the nobleman, and a suspicion of the real truth instantaneously flashed to his mind. It struck him, indeed, that the Earl of Curzon had received the lovely Venetia's favours; hence the inquiry he had just put relative to his connection with that charming creature, — an inquiry which evidently arose from mingled jealousy and curiosity; hence also those remarks which the earl had half-muttered to himself, and hence the vexation which he experienced on reflecting that he had likewise been used as a fitting agent for Venetia's dirty work.

Such were the reflections that swept through the colonel's brain, and no sooner had the truth thus flashed to his comprehension when he all in a moment saw the advantage that might be derived from a knowledge of this important secret.

Suddenly inspired, therefore, by one of those fits of courageous energy which selfish considerations will often excite even on the part of the craven and the poltroon, Malpas seized upon the pistols which the Earl of Curzon had just laid down again on the table.

"Now, then, my lord, it is my turn," he exclaimed, as

he levelled both the weapons pointblank at Curzon's head.

"Don't be a fool," said the nobleman, without losing his presence of mind, and even with a smile of disdain upon his lip.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Malpas, "I will fire, unless you give me certain explanations in your turn. First, then, the secret of your connection with Lady Sackville —"

"You are mighty brave, all of a sudden, Malpas," interrupted the earl, eying the colonel with calm contempt, "but those pistols are not really loaded."

"Then in that case," cried Malpas, who was well assured of the contrary, for he felt convinced that the earl would not have encumbered himself with a pair of useless weapons, "in that case there will be no harm in my firing the pistols at you, just by way of amusement."

"Cease this jesting," said the earl, with a slight but perceptible change of countenance, and a simultaneous recoil from the muzzle of the pistols.

"Ah!" cried Malpas, in accents of triumph and assurance, "I see that they are loaded, and I take Heaven to witness that I will fire. For mark you, I am a desperate man, setting little value on life, because having little left to live for, and I will fire, then, unless you place yourself as much in my power as I have placed myself in yours. Say, then, the secret of your connection with Lady Sackville."

"She has made me her agent in the same way as she has done by you," responded Curzon, now really alarmed lest the colonel should be tempted by the frenzied excitement of opportunity to a fearful retaliation for the scene which had previously taken place.

"No, not merely her agent," ejaculated the colonel, his countenance growing more pale and his lips quivering more nervously through the effort which it cost him thus to display so much energy. "Not her agent, I say, but her lover. Confess the truth."

"Well, it is the truth," rejoined the earl, believing that Malpas had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement rendering him perfectly reckless and desperate.

"That is enough for me," said the colonel, and depositing the pistols upon the table, he instantaneously emptied a

tumbler of water over the priming, so that the weapons might not serve any further purpose of coercion.

At the same moment the sounds of a vehicle approaching up the acclivitous street reached their ears, and hastening each to a separate window, they beheld the expected post-chaise drive up to the door of the hotel. By the light of the street-lamps they observed two female figures alight from the interior of the carriage, and turning away from the casements, they fixed their eyes upon the room door, so as to be ready to welcome (as they thought) the fair ones whom they had caused to be so forcibly carried off.

In a couple of minutes that door was thrown open, and Kobolt made his appearance, exclaiming, "Now, at all events, ladies, any doubt upon the subject will be cleared up, and you shall see who is right."

"Cleared up — heavens! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, as his eyes encountered two female forms which, though cloaked and veiled, were assuredly not those of Emma and Julia Owen.

Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard at once threw up their veils, thus revealing their own antique and repulsive countenances, instead of the youthful and attractive features of the two charming sisters.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon. "What mistake, what treachery is this?"

"These precious hags," cried Malpas, "are but poor substitutes — "

"There!" shrieked forth Mrs. Ranger, in accents of furious indignation, as she bent her looks upon Kobolt, speaking also in the French tongue, "I told you over and over again during the ride hither that there was some fearful mistake."

"Then the error rests not with me," replied the man, curtly, "for I followed the instructions I received to the very letter."

"Yes," added his two companions, who had followed close behind up into the apartment of the hotel, "these women were caught in the villa-gardens, each just where we had been led to expect them."

"My lord," Mrs. Ranger now hastened to observe, — for she knew the Earl of Curzon full well by sight, — "one

word. 'Tis clear you have committed, or, rather, caused to be perpetrated, a most unwarrantable outrage upon me and this good woman here. But if you will at once direct that we be conducted back to Geneva, we will consent to forgive not only yourself but also your accomplice there," — glancing toward Malpas, — " and your agents here," she added, turning toward Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

" For Heaven's sake, begone, then! " exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, and putting a number of gold pieces into Kobolt's hand, he said, " Depart, and undo your night's work as quickly as you have done it."

The next moment the room was cleared of all save the earl and Malpas, who once more found themselves alone together. For nearly a minute did they survey each other with an expression of countenance in which there was something ludicrous, for they both felt all the ridicule of their present position. But they exchanged not a word until the post-chaise had taken its departure, fresh horses having been procured, to retrace its way to Geneva.

" Now what is to be done? " demanded Colonel Malpas, at length breaking a silence which had lasted nearly half an hour.

" For my part," answered Curzon, doggedly, " I wash my hands of any further interference in the business."

With these words he rang the bell furiously, and on the waiter making his appearance, he said, in an imperious tone, " Conduct me to my chamber." Then, without taking any further notice of Malpas, he stalked out of the room.

The colonel likewise sought the couch prepared for him; and on awakening at a late hour in the forenoon, he inquired for the Earl of Curzon.

" Your companion, sir? " observed the domestic to whom the question was put. " Oh, he took his departure an hour ago for Berne."

" Ah! " thought Malpas to himself, " he doubtless means to get back to England as quick as possible, in order to tell a good story to Venetia, and 'tis ten to one that he will throw the whole blame of failure upon me. But I must forestall him, if possible. Waiter, a post-chaise and four immediately."

And in less than half an hour, Colonel Malpas likewise took his departure from Lausanne.

CHAPTER V

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT — ACT THE FIFTH

We must now return to Agatha's bedchamber at the villa in the suburbs of Geneva.

Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, had left Emma and Julia by the bedside of their eldest sister, and as this young lady, who had just become the mother of a dead child, fell into a tranquil slumber, the other two sat silent, or else occasionally conversed in low whispers while watching by the invalid's couch.

An hour elapsed, and Mrs. Ranger did not return. Then another hour passed, and still she came not. Emma and Julia grew seriously alarmed. They were utterly at a loss to conjecture what could detain the old lady. Was it possible that some accident had befallen her? Had she been waylaid and maltreated, or perhaps murdered? They shuddered as they hazarded these surmises to each other; and as the time still kept slipping on and Mrs. Ranger reappeared not, the fears of the two girls became at length absolutely intolerable. Fortunately Agatha still slept on, thus remaining unconscious of the annoyance that was torturing her sisters.

The timepiece on the mantel proclaimed half-past two. Three hours had now elapsed since Mrs. Ranger took her departure with Doctor Maravelli. Suddenly Emma bethought herself of ascertaining whether Mrs. Hubbard had received any intimation from Mrs. Ranger of the probability of this prolonged absence on her part. To Mrs. Hubbard's apartment did Emma accordingly bend her stealthy steps in the dark. But the laundress was not there, nor had her bed been slept in during the night. Tortured with new terrors more agonizing and bewildering than the first alarms, Emma hastened to rejoin her sister

Julia, who became perfectly aghast on hearing that Mrs. Hubbard was not to be found. Conjecture became useless, almost impossible; it was utterly defied by the darkness of the mystery which enwrapped the ominous affair.

Still Agatha slept on, and this was at least fortunate for the two affrighted girls, who would have been loath indeed to communicate their terrors to their invalid sister. But still their own thoughts were harrowing to a degree. What was to be done? Were they to remain quietly and tranquilly in that chamber and allow things to take their course? No, it was impossible. The disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress seemed to be indicative of a thousand unknown dangers, and in the now feverish, excited, and nervous state to which Emma and Julia had been wrought up it seemed to them as if things would grow worse unless actually looked after by themselves.

"This torturing suspense can be endured no longer," whispered Emma. "I am resolved to go down into the garden and ascertain if I can hear anything of them, or even discover the slightest trace."

"But the night is dark as pitch," said Julia, drawing aside the window-curtain for a moment. "You cannot go forth alone, and I dare not accompany you, because Agatha must not be left."

"No, I do not wish you to go with me. You shall remain here," said Emma. "I will steal forth alone. Perhaps Maravelli himself has made away with Mrs. Ranger and the laundress, or perhaps they have been discovered by the police, with the corpse of the child — "

"O horror!" interrupted Julia, a cold tremor passing visibly over her form. "Conjecture may run riot amidst ten thousand dreadful things — But you must not leave me, Emma. If you did not come back, what on earth should I do? "

"What on earth will you do if I remain? " asked Emma. "Come, my dear sister, muster up all your courage; this is no season for faintness of heart. Remain you here with Agatha, while I will, at all events, descend into the garden, for I am now in one of those shocking humours that I feel I shall go mad with the agonies of suspense if I do not take some step toward the solution of this horrible mystery."

With these words Emma flung a reassuring glance upon

her sister Julia, and then stole forth from the room. The passage was, as we have before said, pitch-dark, Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, having extinguished the lamp, but Emma had no difficulty in finding her way to her own chamber, where she hastily put on a cloak and bonnet. She then crept to the staircase, down which she stole noiselessly as a sprite.

Emerging forth from the back entrance of the villa, Emma paused for a moment as she found herself in the darkness, the silence, and the solitude of the spacious grounds in the rear of the dwelling. But, summoning all her fortitude to her aid, she sped forward along a well-known pathway. Shapes of terror, darker than the darkness, seemed to flit around her, and presently a shriek rose to the very tip of her tongue as she all of a sudden caught a glimpse of something white and shapely as a human form, that appeared to stand forth out of the surrounding obscurity. But the conviction flashed upon her mind that it was but one of the marble statues ornamenting the garden which had thus for a moment scared her, and passing the phantom-looking object quickly by, she felt her courage quickly revive again.

Every now and then she paused to listen, but no sound could she hear, save the moaning of the wind and the murmuring of the agitated waters of Lake Leman. Yes, the rustling of the leaves likewise did she hear, as the night-breeze sighed amidst the dewy verdure of the garden, and more than once she fancied that some one was about to rush forth upon her from amidst the trees. Lightly, too, as the tripped along, her footsteps raised echoes which fell upon her ear like the sounds of pursuit, and two or three times she turned abruptly around as if with the desperate resolution of facing some danger which she felt to be advancing from amidst the surrounding gloom. Ever and anon, too, an ice-chill like that of death would strike to her heart, as the idea struck her that a hand, heavy as that of the dead, was full likely to be laid upon her shoulder, and once or twice as an overhanging bough touched her she felt a sudden inclination to shriek out in the accents of intensest horror.

Thus, during the few minutes that it took the young lady to traverse the grounds from the back entrance of the villa to the door in the wall opening on the by-road, did she pass through a dozen different phases of exquisite agony, and on

gaining that door she leaned against it for some minutes while she collected her disordered thoughts.

And now she listened with breathless attention once more, but no sound indicative of human approach met her ears. Slowly she moved away from the door, passing along a gravel walk which ran parallel with the wall. At every dozen yards she stopped to listen, but all in vain, and she already began to reflect whether it would not be better to take a bold and desperate step at once, rather than remain a prey to such harrowing suspense as the disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress had excited. That step which she now began to revolve in her mind was neither more nor less than to proceed at once to Geneva, seek Doctor Maravelli's house, the address of which was known to her, and pursue her inquiries there. But at the very moment when she made up her mind to adopt this course, her foot struck against something that lay upon the footpath which she was pursuing. Whether it were a presentiment which seized upon her at the instant, or whether it were that the very nature of this contact with an object that felt soft as she kicked against it made her divine what it was, we cannot say. Certain it is that a cold shudder shook her from head to foot, making her shiver as if an ice-blast had suddenly shed its influence upon her, but still, with a horrible curiosity, she stooped down to feel for the object in the path. Stronger still was the quivering that now shot through her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet as her hand came in contact with the cold cheek of a tiny corpse.

But all in a moment the superstitious portion of her fears gave way to the sense of a new and more real danger. That it was her sister's dead child she could not doubt, nor dared she wait to ask herself how it could possibly have been left there. There was not a moment to be lost; the infant corpse must be disposed of at once. But how and where? Should she dig a hole in the garden and bury it? No, for the gardener, when coming at daylight, might chance to observe the earth newly dug up, and discovery would then be certain. Far more prudent were it to consign the corpse of the child to the depths of the lake, and then she and her her sisters would at least have the consolation of knowing that the main evidence of the elder's shame was, as it were, annihilated.

The necessity for taking this step inspired Emma with the courage to carry it into execution. But how was she to issue forth from the grounds? If woman's wit, when sharpened by love, can laugh at locksmiths, so can her ingenuity when prompted by a sense of danger be rendered equally acute. It was true that the garden door was locked, but then did she not know that her sister Julia had been wont to meet Curzon at a particular spot where a wooden bench stood on the inner side of the wall and the stump of a tree on the outer side, and had she not often observed those convenient stepping-places? To be sure, and now, quick as thought, she availed herself thereof.

With the infant corpse under her arm, she scaled the wall and sped onward in the direction of the lake. A quarter of an hour's walk brought her to the shore, and pausing to listen, she could catch no sound of human voice or footstep. A leaden obscurity rested upon the lake, an obscurity which by the reflection that a large surface of water always throws up even in the midst of the darkest night, was a shade less sombre than the surrounding blackness. With straining eyes did Emma seek to plunge her looks along the shore, both on the right and left hand, to see if any one were approaching, but she could distinguish nothing. Believing, therefore, that the opportunity was entirely favourable, yet feeling like a guilty wretch who is perpetrating a first heinous crime, with trembling hands did she grope about for a large stone, and with her handkerchief she attached it to the corpse. Then, with all her force, assisted by a sudden access of moral energy, she hurled the burden as far as she could. It fell with a heavy plash, and the next instant her ears caught the gurgling sound of the miniature whirlpool produced by that tiny corpse sinking deep down to its watery sepulchre.

A feeling of relief sprang up in Emma's bosom; but scarcely had this sensation thus taken life, when it was turned into an almost mortal terror as a loud cry and a rush of footsteps burst forth from an old jetty a few yards off.

" Ah! caught at length! " were the words which, in accents of savage triumph and uttered in the strong tones of a male voice speaking in the French language, smote upon her ear, and in less than a minute she was surrounded by half a

dozen men whose swords rattled in their sheaths as they sprang toward her.

"Why, it is a woman!" ejaculated another of the civic guard, for police officers these individuals assuredly were. "It must be a mistake."

"Well, but did you not hear the splash?" exclaimed he who had first spoken, and who was the sergeant of the band. "At all events, let the young person give an account of herself, who she is, where she comes from, what she is doing here, and what made that noise a minute ago in the water."

"Officers," said Emma, driven by very desperation to the exercise of a fortitude the suddenness as well as the strength of which even surprised herself, "I am here with no evil intention. It was a whim, a fantasy, a caprice on my part," she continued, speaking in excellent French, "to ramble on the border of the lake at this hour; and as for the plashing sound which you heard, it was caused by a stone which in a listless mood I picked up and flung into the water."

"'Tis a lady, by the tone of her voice and the language she uses," said one of the officers.

"The greater the reason, then," observed the sergeant, "that she should give a better account of herself. Ladies — that is to say, real ladies — don't come down here to walk at this time of night, or, rather, at such an hour in the morning. It is not at all probable, and though perhaps she is not one of those we have been waiting for, and perhaps has no connection with them, we must nevertheless take her before the night-commissary."

"What!" almost shrieked forth Emma, now smitten with the cruellest, the wildest, the most agonizing terror, "take me before a magistrate?"

"Yes, most assuredly," rejoined the sergeant of police. "What alternative have we? Come, my men, away with her!"

Emma saw in a moment that remonstrance with the sergeant and his functionaries would be all in vain, and indeed would only be calculated to enhance their suspicions against her, but she felt confident that from the courtesy of the Genevese magistrates she had everything favourable to expect. Once more recalling to her aid and hugging, as it were, the fortitude wherewith she had previously armed

herself, she said, in a tone of calmness that contrasted strongly and strangely with her wild ejaculation of a few moments back, " Since it is necessary that we go before a magistrate, I am willing to accompany you."

Away the party accordingly sped to the city, and in about a quarter of an hour they reached a police station where the " night-commissary," or magistrate whose turn it was to take the duty for the twelve current hours, was in attendance.

On being introduced into the common room of the station, Emma retained her veil carefully folded over her countenance, so as to avoid the curious gaze of the persons assembled there, but when she was conducted by the sergeant into the private room where the night-commissary sat, she immediately raised her veil in token of respect for that functionary.

The magistrate was somewhat startled at the revelation of such a charming countenance, and his eyes were at once turned upon the sergeant as if to inquire on what charge such a beautiful young lady could have been brought before him at such an hour.

" According to instructions received," said the sergeant, " I took half a dozen officers with me to keep a watch at that part of the lake where those rascally resurrectionists or fishers of men are in the habit of pursuing their avocation; because the old jetty causes a sort of tide to flow in at that part, and thus if there should happen to be a dead body in the lake, it is pretty sure to find its way to the spot I am speaking of — "

" Spare your details," interrupted the night-commissary, " and come to the point at once, — I mean your charge against this young lady."

" Well, sir, 'tis soon made," resumed the sergeant. " As I and my men lay concealed in the deep shade of the jetty, — although Heaven knows the night was dark enough everywhere, — we heard a sudden splash, and thinking it was the resurrectionists flinging in their drag-hooks, we rushed out and discovered the prisoner. As she refused to give any account of herself, I brought her here."

" So far," said Emma, who had listened with a forced calmness to the sergeant's explanations, even to that portion which touched so ominously upon dead bodies

finding their way into the hands of resurrectionists at the very spot where she had committed her sister's still-born child to the watery depths, " so far from not giving this officer a proper account of myself, I expressly told him that I had wandered forth in a strange and unaccountable mood for a solitary ramble on the border of the lake, and that it was in a listless, unpremeditated manner that I picked up a stone against which my foot struck and tossed it into the water."

" I admit that the lady gave me these explanations," observed the sergeant, " but I did not consider them satisfactory, especially as her name and address were studiously withheld."

" The officer has but done his duty," said the magistrate, addressing Emma in a mild and courteous tone. " Without offering any comment upon your explanation of this unseasonable ramble at so strange a spot, I shall at once allow you to depart upon your giving me some proof of your respectability."

" I have not the slightest objection," said Emma, without a moment's demur, " to give you my name and explain to you who I am and where I live. But inasmuch as an evil interpretation might be put on this very innocent proceeding of mine, — I mean my unseasonable ramble, — I need scarcely point out to you how much I am at your mercy relative to the amount of publicity you may give thereto. But throwing myself entirely on your generous consideration, I have no hesitation in confessing that my name is Emma Owen, and that I am one of the ladies belonging to the household of the Princess of Wales."

" This may be so, and I do not say that I doubt it," remarked the magistrate, " but still I must require some corroboration. Will you permit the sergeant to return with you to the villa inhabited by her Royal Highness the English princess? Or will you send for some tradesman with whom you deal to identify you? "

" Yes, I will adopt this latter course," said Emma, catching at the proposal.

Then, bethinking herself of a very civil and obliging linen-draper with whom she and her sisters had spent a tolerable amount of money, she at once gave his address. The sergeant lost no time in proceeding to the establishment

thus indicated, and arousing the linen-draper from his slumbers, he returned with him in about twenty minutes to the police station. There the tradesman at once identified Miss Owen, and the magistrate, expressing his satisfaction accordingly, proceeded to enter the minutes of the whole proceeding in the police book. Emma availed herself of the opportunity of the commissary's attention being thus engaged to slip a couple of pieces of gold into the sergeant's hand as an inducement for him to observe a profound silence relative to the singular adventure whereof she had just proved the heroine.

Thanking the magistrate for his courtesy toward her, Emma then took her departure, in company with the obliging linen-draper, who insisted upon escorting her back to the villa. On their way thither, the wily girl invented some excuse to account for the dilemma in which she had been involved, and as she concluded her readily invented tale with a request that her companion would send three of his most exquisite pieces of Swiss silk to the villa next day, he did not think it worth while to make any comment on the young lady's representations or criticize them at all closely.

When within a short distance of the villa, she took her leave of him, thanking him for his kindness and promising to obtain for him the exclusive custom of the princess during her stay at Geneva. The tradesman, overjoyed at an incident which promised such advantageous results, sped home again without a single regret at having been called up from his warm bed at such an hour.

It was now four o'clock in the morning, for Emma's absence had lasted exactly one hour and a half. It was quite light, and the bosom of the crescent lake reflected the pure azure of the heavens. Still the hillsides in the vicinage of the lake and the farther off ascents of mountains were veiled in the mists of morning, so that vineyards, hamlets, villas, and all the enchanting scenery belonging to that delightful region were clothed, as it were, in a gauzy dimness. But in the distance, far, far above those fleecy vapours, far far above the mountain-mists, towered the Alpine peaks, shadowed forth in the horizon like magnificent skeletons crowned with their diadems of eternal snow. And high above them all arose Mont Blanc, a giant amidst giants, a colossus making even the surrounding colossal heights seem

like pigmies, and looking like a pedestal on which the arch of heaven itself rested.

Yet little recked Emma for that sublime and wondrous panorama thus stretching itself out before her eyes. She was now full of anxiety how to obtain admission back into the villa. To scale the wall at the risk of being observed from the casements of the dwelling, or by the gardener himself, was impossible. To go boldly around to the front door and knock for admittance, as if she were returning from an early ramble, would be to create an immediate suspicion as to how she could have gone forth. For a few minutes she felt completely bewildered, when, to her joy, she observed the gardener coming forth with a wheelbarrow full of rubbish from the door in the boundary-wall. Watching till he was at a convenient distance, she glided through that doorway into the grounds, and then boldly traversed them with the air of one who was merely taking an early walk.

No one however, perceived her, and thus, without encountering a soul, did she reënter the villa, ascend the back staircase, and steal her way, unobserved, to her sister Agatha's chamber.

Meanwhile Julia had been suffering indescribable torture on account of Emma's prolonged absence. But fortunately Agatha had slept on the whole time, and she was only now awakened by the return of Emma into the chamber. Slipping off her cloak and bonnet, Emma made a sign for Julia not to enter upon any disagreeable communication to Agatha, it being absolutely necessary that she should experience no annoyance or shock to impede her progress toward a speedy convalescence. It was not, therefore, until Agatha fell into a sound slumber again, which she did in about half an hour, that Emma had an opportunity of explaining to Julia all that had occurred during her brief but momentous absence. And now conjecture was again rife with the two girls to account for the prolonged disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress, and the circumstance of the child having been dropped in the garden.

But we need not dwell upon the many hypotheses which Emma and Julia conjured up to account for those things which it was quite impossible could be thus accounted for by any surmise on their part. Hour after hour passed. They made themselves some breakfast, and they performed

copious ablutions to bring back to their cheeks the roses which this long vigil and sleepless night had chased thence. At length, as the timepiece struck eight, the door of the chamber opened, and the lost Mrs. Ranger made her appearance.

She and Mrs. Hubbard had just returned from their forced expedition to Lausanne, and being set down by the post-chaise at a short distance from the villa, they had entered its precincts separately, and without attracting any particular attention on the part of the menials who were by this time all bustling about.

Many and varied, strange and exciting also, were the mutual explanations which now took place. Mrs. Ranger told her story first, and it was thence evident enough that Curzon and Malpas had intended the forcible abduction of Emma and Julia, for whom Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard had been so ludicrously mistaken. The circumstance of the child being found in the garden by Emma was now also fully accounted for, and, on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger was relieved of a poignant source of alarm on hearing that the infant corpse, instead of being left in the grounds, had been consigned to the bottom of the lake. In a word, it was agreed by the two young ladies and the old one, when all these explanations were concluded, that neither in truthful history nor in fictitious romance had a night ever occurred so full of varied, strange, and exciting adventures as the one that had just passed.

"But Mrs. Hubbard?" said Julia, interrogatively, "what does she think now? What must she suspect?"

"She suspects nothing that we do not wish her to suspect," answered Mrs. Ranger. "In the first place, her ignorance of the French language prevented her from understanding anything that took place between me and the villain, whose name appears to be Kobolt, during the journey to Lausanne and back again hither. Moreover, when we found ourselves face to face with Curzon and Malpas at Lausanne, I so promptly stopped any unnecessary explanation that Mrs. Hubbard gleaned not from their lips how it was yourselves, my dear Emma and Julia, whom they had intended to have carried off. The result is that Mrs. Hubbard has come back no wiser then she went relative to anything which we do not wish her to know. As for inventing some feasible expla-

nation for the outrage thus perpetrated upon herself and me, and also for devising a motive to induce her to maintain a strict silence upon the subject — "

" Oh, we can trust you, my dear Mrs. Ranger, upon all those points," exclaimed Emma. " And though you and I have lost our lovers, Julia," she added, turning to her sister in a laughing manner, " we must congratulate ourselves on the turn which events have taken."

A few hours later, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was surrounded, as usual, in her breakfast-parlour, by her six ladies in waiting. Yes, there was not even an exception on this occasion with regard to Agatha Owen. Although but twelve hours had elapsed since she had experienced the pains of maternity, yet did she leave her couch, assume an elegant apparel, and appear in her accustomed place about the person of the Princess of Wales. But then the stimulant which Mrs. Ranger had given her was of such sovereign effect and invigorating qualities, the hand, too, of Mrs. Ranger had so skilfully applied an artificial shade of bloom to the young lady's pale cheeks, and the arrangements of her toilet were so well combined to prevent the appearance of any diminution in her shape, that it would have been impossible for even the most scrutinizing observer to entertain a suspicion of what had befallen Agatha within the last four and twenty hours.

Here, then, may we drop the curtain upon the fifth act of this drama of a night.

CHAPTER VI

THE AVOWAL OF LOVE

We must now again transport the reader's attention back to the English capital, the huge Babylon where millions of interests are ever jarring, where, notwithstanding a much-vaunted freedom, might is ever trampling upon right, and, with all its boasted civilization, society exhibits the barbarism of the industrious many being beggared to maintain the favoured few in luxurious indolence.

Yes, this is the city where the most tremendous anomalies, the most striking contrasts, and the most amazing inconsistencies cannot fail to arrest the gaze and rivet the attention. There worthlessness and immorality are seen in palaces, in mansions, at luxurious banquets, and in gilded equipages, while integrity and virtue are crushed unto the earth, trampled into the dust, forced into contact with crime, doomed to have their very nature changed, and then plunged into the workhouse or the gaol. There, in that modern Babylon, is the false god set up which three thousand years ago the king of ancient Babylon ventured to erect in the plain of Dura, — that golden image which doubtless represented Mammon then and bears the name of Mammon now, and which all kneel down and worship of their own accord and without any bidding. Here, too, in this grand and mighty London of ours, which Britons proclaim to be not merely the metropolis of their own land, but of the entire world, here, in this city, where art the most exquisite, science the most refined, discovery the most strange, and ingenuity the most persevering are ever multiplying their marvels, and heaping up wonder upon wonder, here is society cursed with the foulest moral leprosy that ever tyrannical institutions, infamous laws, and execrable social

systems inflicted upon a community calling itself civilized.

But to our tale. About the same time that the events of the last few chapters were occurring on the shores of Lake Leman, the following scene took place at the mansion of Lord and Lady Florimel in Piccadilly.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and in the splendid drawing-room of that palatial residence sat Florence Eaton and Valentine Malvern.

The young lady was engaged in some elegant fancy work, while the young gentleman was conversing with her, not in the frivolous style so common in aristocratic circles, nor upon the vanities, gaieties, and dissipations of the great metropolis. They were not discussing the attractions of the opera, nor the merits of the newest piece produced at Covent Garden, nor the last brilliant party given by some splendid duchess, nor the tittle-tattle, scandal, and flying rumours at that particular period constituting the "nine days' wonder" of the fashionable world. But that maiden so lovely and that youth so handsome were conversing on subjects which, if not gay, were at all events not too grave, and if far from frivolous and light, were equally distant from being ponderous and dull. For the topics of their discourse were poetry, music, painting, and sculpture, and in exchanging their remarks thereon they showed no affected love for something which they could not understand, but a pure taste and a sound judgment in the appreciation of all the beauties of those sublime arts.

Upwards of four months had elapsed since Valentine Malvern, when thrown from his horse in Hyde Park, was conveyed in an unconscious state to Florimel House in Piccadilly. The physicians who were summoned at the time ordered that he should be kept as tranquil as possible, lest concussion of the brain might supervene. Thereupon the hospitality of Lord Florimel, exercised with the due assent of his amiable Pauline, was so generously manifested toward the invalid that for upwards of a month did he remain beneath that roof. His recovery, indeed, was somewhat slow, as he had received a very severe shock from the accident, nor would Lord Florimel hear of his new friend leaving Piccadilly and returning to Hanover Square until the medical attendant pronounced him convalescent.

As a matter of course, an acquaintance commenced under such circumstances was not likely to be disregarded by those concerned. Indeed, it was an acquaintance of the kind which, with congenial dispositions, soon ripens into friendship, and thus was it that an intimacy sprang up between Valentine Malvern and the Florimel family. His lordship and Pauline soon became much interested in this young gentleman, whose handsome countenance wore the impress of early sorrows, and whose disposition, naturally studious and thoughtful, was prematurely tinged with a melancholy shade. On the other hand, Valentine himself soon experienced a sincere admiration and profound respect for this noble couple, whose affections were so thoroughly centred in each other, and who after so many years of marriage seemed lovers still.

But we must not forget to state — and, indeed, the very progress of our tale requires that we should mention — the impression which Valentine Malvern and Florence Eaton made upon each other. In this young maiden of nineteen did Valentine behold the personification of all the sweetest attributes belonging unto woman. He found her endowed with a personal beauty the rarest, the most interesting, while of all the mental charms that can possibly ornament her sex those of Florence were the truest, the choicest, and the best. On the other hand, though innocent as an angel and artless as the infant child, pure and spotless in soul as she was stainless and bright in her Madonna-like beauty, she could not remain insensible to the handsome person, the pleasing manners, the intellectual qualities, and the sterling virtues of Valentine Malvern. She beheld him mournful and unhappy on account of his father's still incomprehensible disappearance, and she naturally felt interested in one who, though of an age when the world's sunlight usually dissipates even the darkest clouds that gather around the heart, gave himself up to the absorbing fervour of that filial piety with which he continued to revere a lost parent's memory.

During the four months, then, that had now elapsed since Valentine Malvern first became acquainted with the Florimels, there had been ample leisure and full opportunity for himself and Florence Eaton to know, to understand, and to like each other. The maiden's aunt and uncle be-

held the progress of this affection between the young couple, and though they did nothing to encourage it, they were likewise careful against impeding its development. They had already resolved that whenever the time came for their well-beloved niece to enter the matrimonial sphere, the merits and not the rank, the virtues and not the social position of him on whom her affections might rest, should be taken into consideration. Therefore, when Florimel and Pauline observed that Florence was disposed to give her heart to a young man who not only possessed every mental qualification, but the advantages of rank and fortune into the bargain, they rejoiced unfeignedly. It was in secret, however, that they thus rejoiced, for they were resolved to allow their niece's attachment to take its own course, so that she might not, by receiving encouragement from them, prematurely assume that her liking was in reality a love.

But at the end of the four months of their acquaintance, Valentine Malvern, in a frank and candid manner, sought an opportunity of communicating to Lord and Lady Florimel the affection which he entertained toward their lovely niece. In thus revealing to them, in the first instance, the state of his feelings, he was actuated by the most honourable of motives, namely, to ascertain from them whether it would be agreeable that he should propose himself to the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton as a suitor for her hand. Lord and Lady Florimel at once expressed their full concurrence therein, and the circumstance of the reader's now finding the young gentleman and the youthful maiden alone together in the drawing-room was in truth the opportunity which the uncle and aunt had purposely afforded for the avowal of love.

We said that during the first portion of this interview the conversation had dwelt upon those subjects which are the recreation of the truly healthful mind. But gradually did Valentine turn the discourse into that channel which was to bring to an issue the subject he had nearest and dearest at heart. Unconscious was the sweet Florence, in her girlish innocence, of the point to which her companion's remarks were at length tending, but when, with a due amount of delicate preparation and suitable preface, he ushered in the tender topic, oh, how her heart began to palpitate in her bosom like a bird fluttering in its cage, how

the roseate hue went and came upon her damask cheeks, and how strangely, almost overpoweringly, streamed forth upon her comprehension the floods of light from that temple of love the portals of which were now unfolding to her knowledge!

And then, oh, then, how ravishingly beautiful appeared the damsel in this moment when a new source of happiness became known to her, when she understood the meaning of those sentiments that hitherto she had cherished unconsciously and unwittingly toward Valentine, and when her pure but enthusiastic soul was thus suddenly brought to a more vivid and rapturous comprehension than ever she had experienced before of that æsthetic feeling which the poet has embodied in his verse, the painter has made to glow on his canvas, the sculptor has personified in his almost breathing statue, and the musician has sent soaring up to heaven on the wings of divinest melody.

"Miss Eaton," said the young man, in those hushed and tremulous accents which, when vibrating with a masculine harmony and conveying the language of love no young female can hear with impunity, "it is by the permission of your excellent uncle and aunt that I am thus permitted to address you. I do not fall at your feet, I do not give vent to impassioned language, full of vows, and pledges, and protestations, but not the less inspired with the deepest feeling and experiencing the profoundest emotion, I beg to offer you my hand as you already possess my heart."

With downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, Florence Eaton proffered her own fair hand, thus mutely, yet, oh, how eloquently, giving the affirmative answer to the suit which he had pleaded in terms so manly but in tones so tender.

"Thanks, ten thousand thanks, dearest, dearest young lady," said Malvern, as he took that fair hand and respectfully conveyed it to his lips, but though there was bashful hesitation in the manner in which he thus kissed the maiden's hand, there was nevertheless a thrill of ecstatic rapture in the accents wherein he conveyed his gratitude for the bestowal of it. "Florence," he continued, now calling her by her Christian name for the first time, "again and again I thank thee."

How sweet, oh, how sweet to the maiden's ear is her own Christian name when breathed for the first time by the lips

of one who has just revealed the love that inspires his heart. Oh, the world has no happiness to compare with this. The most delicious music is dull and vapid in comparison with the melody of the lover's voice when softly syllabling the name of the adored one. Deep, deep into the soul it sinks, not with a force that jars upon the tender chords of the heart, but gentle and tender, as the balmy breeze laden with the perfume of roses steals upon the strings of an Æolian harp, awakening all the delicious pathos of its murmuring melody.

"You thank me for placing this hand in yours," said Florence, after a long pause and with a look of innocent fondness flung hastily upon her lover, "but have I not also to thank you for thus selecting me from the many ladies of your acquaintance — "

"No, no," interrupted Valentine, with much concentrated enthusiasm in his tone, "'tis I who owe all the debt of gratitude unto you, for, without flattery and without compliment, 'tis an angel that thus promises herself to a humble mortal."

In the strain which is usual with lovers in the first hour of their affection's avowal did Valentine and Florence continue to discourse for some time, and at length the young man found himself touching upon a subject which stole in, as it were, painfully and darkly amidst his present dream of bliss, but on which he nevertheless deemed it requisite to deliver a few comments.

"You are aware, my dear Florence," he said, "that not a year has elapsed since the extraordinary and still unaccountable disappearance of my father. You behold me in mourning, because I believe him to be dead. Indeed, what circumstance save his death could possibly prove the solution of the present mystery? In the vigour of his manhood, endowed with all the choicest gifts of fortune, surrounded by affectionate friends, and having everything to render life agreeable, it is not for a moment to be believed that he could have voluntarily expatriated himself. The same reasons argue with equal strength against the supposition that he could have accomplished his self-destruction. What, then, must I suppose? Either that he met his death by accident, or that he was foully dealt with. But if it were indeed an accident, some trace would have survived, some

clue would have remained, and none has ever been found. Alas! on what belief, then, must my conjectures settle? You can well understand, my dear Florence, how under such circumstances I am inspired by an ardent longing, a deep, unappeasable yearning, to discover the author or authors of this dreadful crime, if such a crime have in reality been perpetrated. Therefore, in offering you my hand, it is requisite I should explain to you that although your image will ever henceforth be uppermost on the bright side of my thoughts, yet on the dark side will remain the memory of that sire whose blood seems to be crying up from some unknown spot for vengeance on those who shed it. Tell me, then, will you accept as your husband one whose thoughts will be thus to some extent divided, one who at any moment may have to rush away from your sweet society, to follow up some new track, some fresh clue that may develop itself? "

" Continue not this painful topic," said Florence, in a tremulous voice and with tears trickling down her cheeks. " The feelings which inspire you relative to your father are most honourable, most admirable, and when it shall be my happiness to become your wife," she added, with blushing cheeks, " it will be my duty to encourage you in this filial research to which you have devoted yourself. Yes, and also to succour you in it to the utmost of my power."

" Words cannot express the gratitude I feel toward you, Florence, for these assurances," said Valentine. " In the midst of the sorrow which has enveloped me, as it were, in a cloud, you have been sent to irradiate my path and cheer me with your angel presence. Pardon me, oh, pardon me, if I have now by this conversation infused into your mind some of that gloom which hangs about my own soul, but I could not, I dared not, conceal a single thought nor a single feeling at a moment when our hearts should be revealed to each other and the fullest confidence should subsist between us."

" Yes, we should indeed mutually make known all our secrets," said Florence, suddenly becoming pensive and even melancholy, so that Malvern instantaneously perceived it was a mournfulness apart from that which his own language had a few minutes before been calculated to inspire. " Yes," she again observed, in a musing manner and with deepening pensiveness, " there must be no secrets between us, and

therefore shall I unveil my thoughts upon a certain subject — "

She paused, and for a moment Valentine Malvern gazed upon her with surprise and curiosity, for he was naturally at a loss to conjecture what secret could be cherished in the bosom of a maiden who was not only so artless and so innocent, but who had likewise come so little in contact with the world.

" Ah! I perceive that you are already astonished at my words," said Florence, in a gayer tone, but yet with a half-subdued sigh, " and when I explain myself, you will doubtless think that I am very foolish, perhaps very wrong, to allow the incident to which I allude to produce such an impression upon my mind. But in a few words can I explain myself."

Malvern was evidently listening with the utmost attention, and Florence proceeded in the following manner:

" Four months have elapsed since the occurrence of which I am about to speak. At that time my aunt took me to St. James's Palace to view the State Apartments. In the Royal Closet we accidentally encountered the prince regent, who immediately appeared strangely excited on beholding me. Suddenly drawing forth a small miniature, he gazed upon it with a mingled melancholy and tenderness that I never can forget. It also seemed as if there were something like the agony of remorse in that expression which thus swept over his countenance, and methought that he compared the portrait which so deeply moved him with my features. I felt amazed, and even startled, and feelings so strange and unaccountable that I cannot possibly describe them sprang up in my soul. The prince took my hand and said, ' Pardon me, pardon me, young lady, but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more.' The words, as well as the look that accompanied them, have remained indelibly impressed upon my memory. At the time they filled me with confusion, and almost overwhelmed me with dismay, for the hand of the prince trembled violently as he held mine, and he gazed upon me as if actually asking pardon for some fault which he had committed, or some injury that he had done me. I forgot at the moment that he was a prince, and the feeling of awe inspired by his rank being thus temporarily suspended, I experienced a sudden but boundless

compassion for that being who regarded me in such a manner. My aunt hurried me away to the Princess Sophia's apartments. We soon afterward entered the carriage and drove into Hyde Park, on which occasion it was that the accident occurred to yourself. From that day forth my aunt has never once alluded to the scene at St. James's Palace, nor have I mentioned it in her hearing. But I have nevertheless thought of it, yes, and thought of it often. It steals into my waking reflections by day, and mingles with my dreams by night. It appears to have interwoven itself with the threads of my destiny. Frequently do I reason with myself on the folly of thus attaching importance to an incident which was explained at the time, namely, my resemblance to a deceased friend of the prince having so deeply moved him. But vainly do I thus reason. A mysterious voice seems to whisper in the profundities of my soul that there is an importance attached to that incident, and that its solution is otherwise than was represented. This idea has grown upon me, it has settled itself in my mind, — it has become a conviction against which no self-reasoning on my part can wrestle. Doubtless you will blame me, you will consider me to be very foolish."

"Not so, Florence," observed Valentine, who had listened with the deepest interest to the strange but artless narrative which the young maiden had delivered with such frankness and candour. "The incident to which you have alluded has evidently made a strong impression on your mind. Indeed, it has acquired the power of a spell or a superstition over you, and therefore your feelings are entitled to the utmost respect, especially on the part of one who aspires to the possession of your hand. But think you not that if the occurrence had really possessed any important significancy, beyond what it appeared to have, think you not, I ask, that your aunt, who is all goodness and all kindness, would have cleared up the mystery to you?"

"Alas!" said Florence, shaking her head mournfully, and with the tears starting forth on her long lashes, "there are moments when I have experienced ungenerous and rebellious thoughts against my excellent aunt, that is to say, I have fancied that her silence relative to the incident at the palace has been a studied one, and that she has some special motive for avoiding all allusion thereto. If it were

not for these ideas, which at times haunt me like darksome suspicions, I should have revealed to the ears of my aunt the thoughts and sensations which I have now revealed to you. I should have thrown myself into her arms and explained the wild, the singular, and the mysterious impressions which that incident has left upon my memory. But I dare not thus touch upon the subject before my aunt, — a subject which methinks she studiously avoids; and for some weeks past a damp has fallen at times upon my spirits when I reflect that I am cherishing a secret unknown to those kind and generous relatives to whom I am so incalculably indebted."

"The revelation you have now made gives me pain, Florence," said Valentine, "because I understand full well that this secret is preying upon you. You must endeavour to banish the impression from your mind — "

"No, that is impossible," interrupted Florence, with accents of mournful firmness. "You have a belief that your lamented father has been the victim of a crime, and you cherish the presentiment that sooner or later you will be enabled to clear up the mystery. On my part I have a belief that the incident of St. James's Palace is in some manner interwoven with my destiny, and I cherish the presentiment that time will afford a full and complete explanation. Ah! Valentine," she said, after a few moments' deep reflection, and now suddenly fixing her eyes, those lovely azure eyes, upon the handsome youth who sat by her side, retaining one of her fair hands in his own, "when you ere now spoke to me of your desire to unravel the mystery which occupies so large a portion of your thoughts, did I not declare that to the extent of my humble ability, weak, timid, and powerless girl that I am, I would assist you? "

"Oh, dearest Florence, now I comprehend you," exclaimed Valentine. "You wish that I should reciprocate the pledge, and that I should do my best to clear up this mystery which envelops the incident of the palace, if a mystery there really be? I will do so, I will do so."

The young maiden bent upon her lover a look beaming with gratitude, and they immediately turned their discourse upon topics of a more cheerful character.

CHAPTER VII

VENETIA AND HER AGENT

About ten days after the incidents which we have just related, and as the delicious month of April was verging toward a close, the last of a series of private dramatic performances was to take place at Carlton House.

Accordingly, between seven and eight o'clock on a certain evening, we shall find the beautiful Venetia dressing in her own chamber for the part which she was to take in the drama. The tasteful Jessica and another maid assisted at this toilet, which was so well calculated to display the grand and voluptuous charms of Lady Sackville to their fullest advantage. We need not, however, linger to describe her personal appearance on the occasion. Suffice it to say that she wore her auburn hair showering in ringlets over her naked shoulders so dazzlingly white, and that some natural flowers were the only ornament which appeared upon those Hyperion locks. Her drapery, gauzy and transparent, low in the body and short in the skirt, revealed the luxuriance of her bust and all the symmetry of her limbs. Her arms were naked; and thus was the brilliant Venetia dressed, or, rather, undressed, in a manner the most voluptuous and the most provocative.

It was half-past seven, and the performances were to commence at eight. Her toilet was thus achieved in good time, and when it was completed she dismissed her maids and sat down to cast a look over her written part. But not many minutes did she remain thus alone, for Jessica reappeared with the announcement that Colonel Malpas was in the drawing-room and requested an immediate interview.

"Ah!" ejaculated Venetia, "he is returned, then, and I will see him, if only for a few minutes."

She accordingly issued from her chamber and repaired to the drawing-room belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband occupied at Carlton House. In such haste was she to see the colonel and hear from his lips the issue of his mission upon the Continent, that she quite forgot at the moment the manner in which she was apparelled, and it was not until she actually stood in his presence and observed his eyes suddenly light up with a look of fervid devouring passion as she thus burst upon his sight, that she remembered how lightly she was clad. But being thus accustomed to display herself in those private dramatic representations wherein all the sensualities of the public stage were so shamelessly imitated, she experienced no bashfulness as the circumstance of her seminudity was thus recalled to her mind. Indeed, she could not be disposed to experience any more shame in thus displaying herself to the eyes of Malpas than she did when appearing on the mimic stage before her select patrician audience.

The effect, however, thus produced upon Colonel Malpas was as powerful as it was instantaneous. The sudden appearance of that woman so superbly handsome, in such a luxurious undress and in the roseate light which flooded the splendidly furnished drawing-room, was enough to arouse the passions of even a more sober-minded individual than Malpas and excite them to a frenzied degree. He had always regarded her as supremely beautiful, from the very first; he had looked upon her as the most desirable creature he had ever set eyes upon, but now she seemed to burst upon his view clothed with a loveliness so transcending in its brilliancy, so overpowering in its grandeur, so intoxicating in its influence, that small marvel was it if the fires of the colonel's sensual cravings thus flamed up all in a moment to a maddening degree.

"Sit down, Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, immediately assuming an aspect of dignified reserve as she waved her hand toward a seat. Then placing herself on a sofa at a little distance, she hastened to observe, "We have private theatricals here this evening, and hence the garb which doubtless strikes you as strange."

"Not strange, your ladyship, but as wondrously becoming," said the colonel, in a tone insidiously complimentary. "To speak with candour, indeed, I never saw your ladyship

to such advantage before, so dazzlingly handsome, so exquisitely charming — "

"Enough, sir," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance flushing with indignation; but as the crimson tide not only mantled upon her cheeks, but also poured over her softly rounded shoulders and her heaving bosom, she looked all the more grandly beautiful, and the colonel's passions were excited if possible to a more frenzied pitch. "Our interview must on the present occasion be brief," she continued, in a tone that was intended to overawe the colonel, and make him feel that though she had used him as the agent of her schemes, she utterly hated and despised him. "Tell me, therefore, in a word, what you have done, and to-morrow you can call again and give me the details."

"I am sorry to inform your ladyship that I have done nothing effective," answered Malpas.

"Nothing!" echoed Venetia, with mingled surprise and indignation, "absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing, my lady, absolutely nothing," responded Malpas, not adopting so humble a tone as when he was last in her presence. "I shall not attempt to deceive you, and therefore I must at once confess that in spite of all the various plans and manœuvres I adopted, nothing has been done."

"And yet," exclaimed Venetia, now appearing pale with anger not only at this acknowledgment of utter failure on the colonel's part, but likewise because she noticed a sort of flippancy and assurance in his tone which she was not altogether at a loss to understand, "and yet in your letters you assured me that one of the Owens had become your mistress."

"True enough, my lady," rejoined the colonel, "but equally true it is that so far from my being able to make use of that connection in a manner serviceable to the objects of my mission, I do really believe that I myself was rendered a dupe and an instrument by the young lady. To be brief, Lord Curzon — "

"Ah! you have met, then?" exclaimed Venetia; but, instantly recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Proceed. I was interrupting you."

"Well, the truth is soon told, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, with increasing assurance alike of tone and manner, "Lord Curzon and I did meet at Geneva, and we

became as good friends as ever. In fact, there was a complete understanding established between us."

"That is to say," remarked Venetia, in a cold tone, but subduing her rage and vexation only with a most powerful effort, "that is to say, you revealed to his lordship the object of your mission as well as the name of her who sent you, and he gave you a similar explanation. Was it not so?"

"It was," answered Malpas and now his eyes actually flamed as they dwelt devouringly and gloatingly upon the splendid person of Venetia.

"I ought to have foreseen that they would have thus met," she thought within herself. "But, after all, no harm can possibly result from such an encounter. Curzon would not have betrayed his intimacy with me." Then suddenly casting her eyes upon Malpas and observing the unmistakable longings of desire that glowed in his looks, she said, with a haughty dignity, "You will be so kind as to call upon me to-morrow at noon, and we will converse further upon these matters."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, suddenly assuming a tone and manner of insolent assurance and dogged authority, "there is no time like the present, for when I come to-morrow, it is just as likely as not that the hall porter will declare your ladyship to be invisible. I dare say you have five minutes to spare. In that five minutes all can be said that need be said."

From the first moment of Venetia entering that drawing-room upon the present occasion, her eyes had lost the amorous languor which was habitually wont to fill them and partially to weigh down the thickly fringed lids. But gradually as Malpas proceeded with this last speech, in which he so completely threw off the mask, and not merely hurled defiance at the lady, but seemed to feel a consciousness of power over her, the steady calmness that had displaced the languor of her gaze flamed up into a burning look which flung its vivid lightnings upon the man who thus dared to insult her.

"You appear more gloriously handsome than ever," said Colonel Malpas, wincing somewhat for a moment before that blaze of wrathful feeling; but recollecting that, after all, it was but a woman against whom he was now waging war, he became valorous once more. "A few minutes back,"

he continued, "you looked as calmly dignified and as elegantly stately as the Goddess Diana, but now you seem superb and terrible as Juno the queen of heaven."

"Leave the room, sir," exclaimed Venetia, rising from her seat and catching hold of the bell-cord. "Remain another instant and I summon the lackeys to thrust you forth."

"Ah! would you dare heap insults on me again?" cried Malpas, also springing from his chair. Then, with a look of malignant triumph, he said, "Madam, you are in my power, utterly in my power, and you would do well to come to terms with me."

"In your power, sir! It is ridiculous!" ejaculated Venetia, in a tone of scorn and with a look of withering indignation, but still she did not pull the bell, for she felt that she was not standing on the securest ground possible in respect to Malpas. "You doubtless think," she continued to observe, "that because I have entrusted you with a delicate and secret mission you have acquired a certain authority over me, and you imagine to work upon my fears?"

"You speak the exact truth," said Malpas, "and remember that if we have now come to serious language, it is your ladyship who has provoked it."

"Penniless, wretched, and miserable," said Venetia, in a bitter tone, "did you issue from a debtor's gaol, and the first person to whom you applied was the very last to whom you should have so addressed yourself. Nevertheless, I took you by the hand, I gave you employment, I put gold into your pocket, and now you seek to turn around upon me, viper that you are. But I will trample you beneath my heel, I will crush you as I would a worm, I will cover you with confusion, infamy, and disgrace."

As Venetia thus spoke, her form seemed to dilate, her stature heightened, her bust expanded, her cheeks mantled with the deepest carnation, her eyes vibrated like stars, her beauty became alike grand and terrible.

"Oh, since you treat the matter thus," said Malpas, "let us understand each other. Think you that I have ever forgotten, or could have ever forgiven, the tremendous exposure which took place when the Banquet of Six was given at my house? No, by heavens, it was a barbed arrow that rankled

in my heart. And yet I never thought, I never even ventured to hope, that the day would come when I should be avenged. It did not seem possible that such good fortune was in store for me. On issuing from prison, I addressed myself to you in my despair, but it was not through friendship, no, not even with so beggarly a feeling as charity, that you condescended to return a favourable answer to my petition. You wanted an individual who was to become your instrument, your tool, your cat's-paw in playing a certain game in the affairs of the Princess of Wales. What your object was, Heaven only knows, and I care not. Suffice it for me to say that I am so deep in your confidence as to hold you completely in my power — "

" Ah! think you," interrupted Venetia, who had listened with glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and scornful lips to the colonel's long speech, " think you that I reck for these implied menaces on your part? Do I not know that gold is all you require, and that your present proceeding is nought but a scandalous mode of extortion? Having failed in your mission, you fancied that I should overwhelm you with reproaches and refuse you any remuneration for such efforts as you may have made in the affair. You therefore think to forestall my anger by this cowardly demonstration on your part. Now tell me what is the amount you require. Name it. Then away with you, and let me see your face no more! "

" Not so fast, my lady, if you please," said Malpas, with an air of cool unconcern, as if he knew that he was enabled to dictate his own conditions and that Venetia dared not refuse compliance therewith. " I am not altogether mercenary, although money is certainly an article that I require and which I mean to have, and to a tolerable handsome amount too. But your ladyship possesses other attractions beside your wealth."

" Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, concentrating all the lightnings of her looks upon the individual who stood before her, " let this scene end at once. I have neither time nor inclination to prolong it. It wants but ten minutes to eight, and at eight my presence will be required elsewhere. Therefore name the sum that you require; it shall be forthcoming at any hour to-morrow. But if you dare breathe another word derogatory to my feelings as a woman, I at

once break off all compromise and leave you to do your worst."

"We shall see," observed Malpas, flippantly. "Ten minutes more, eh?" he continued, glancing at the timepiece. "In that ten minutes everything may be settled amicably between us. You do not seem to comprehend the position in which you stand. In the first place, what would his Royal Highness say if I were to inform him that you have been plotting and planning to counteract all his plots and plans?"

"He would not believe you," responded Venetia, in a tone of apparent confidence, although she did not feel quite so certain on the subject as she chose to appear, and it was this misgiving that rendered her in reality anxious to put a golden seal upon the colonel's lips. "Judging by your antecedents, the prince knows you to be capable of the foulest falsehood. Therefore go and tell his Royal Highness what you choose. He would only wonder how you came to learn that there was any conspiracy in existence at all against the princess, but he would not believe you, even on oath, were you to declare that you obtained that knowledge from me, much less that I had actually employed you to counteract the progress thereof."

"Well," exclaimed Malpas, a diabolical smile of satisfaction again appearing upon his features, "your ladyship now drives me to extremes. If the prince would not believe all those matters which you have detailed, is it any reason that he should disbelieve me if I assured him that his beautiful mistress, on whose head he has heaped wealth and honours, has bestowed her favours on the Earl of Curzon?"

Venetia staggered as if struck by the sudden blow of a hammer, and while every shade and tint of vital colouring disappeared, leaving her cheeks pale as alabaster, she sank back upon the sofa whence she had risen a few moments previously. It was an awful consternation, a frightful dismay that had seized upon her. Until this moment she had believed that Curzon, though an unprincipled libertine and a reckless profligate, as most aristocrats are, was nevertheless high-souled and generous enough to keep the secret of an affair of gallantry as inviolably as if life itself depended on it. But no, it was evident that Curzon was a traitor, and that by his treachery her honour was now

placed at the mercy of Colonel Malpas, the most finished scoundrel that ever belonged to fashionable society.

"Your ladyship sees that I am not to be trifled with," he said, inwardly exulting at the confirmation which his bold averment had just received in the effect it produced upon Venetia.

"The Earl of Curzon is a traitor," she said, after a long pause, during which it cost her more than one effort to regain her self-possession. "But come, sir, what is it you require? And if ever," she added, in a tremulous tone, "you knew how to spare the feelings of a lady, I beseech you to do so now."

"My terms are speedily named," replied Malpas. Then, fixing his looks upon her in a manner which showed him to be inexorable, he said, "Five thousand guineas in the first place, and in the second, the same favour which you have bestowed upon the Earl of Curzon."

Venetia started, although she had foreseen what was coming, and, fixing her eyes upon the colonel, she was about to entreat his mercy as to the latter condition, when a sudden idea struck her.

"You are resolved upon enforcing these terms?" she said, in a cold voice and with a look that suddenly became settled and steady.

"I am resolved," he answered, thinking she had made up her mind to the worst. "Nothing can shake my determination."

"Then must it be as you say," observed Venetia. "To-morrow night, at eleven o'clock, you must be at the private door opening from the palace into the park, and my maid Jessica will give you admittance."

"Ah! but how do I know that the door will really open to admit me?" exclaimed Malpas. "Once get out of a palace, and it is not so easy to get in again."

"Am I not completely in your power?" asked Venetia. "If I accede to the conditions you have laid down, it is to purchase your secrecy. Think you, then, that if I chose to defy you I could not as well do it at once by ordering you to quit the palace, as to-morrow night by refusing to readmit you into it?"

"True," said Malpas, who saw plainly enough that Venetia felt herself to be really and truly in his power. "At

eleven o'clock to-morrow night I shall be at the private door which you have named."

He then bowed and hastened from the room, Jessica being in readiness on the landing to conduct him unobserved out of the palace, for she knew full well that he had been employed by her mistress in some secret matters, and that it was by no means desirable for him to be seen and recognized within those walls, inasmuch as it would naturally strike either the prince regent or Lord Sackville as remarkably strange that Venetia should hold any intercourse with a man who had played so vile a part toward her on former occasions.

Yes, and bitterly, bitterly, too, did Venetia repent the precipitation and rashness with which she had thus renewed her acquaintance with the colonel. But there was now no remedy for it; the mischief was done, and she must either ward off the consequences if she could, or mitigate them as much as possible.

But, ah! eight o'clock strikes; it is time for her to repair to the greenroom and join the throng of amateurs who are to appear upon the stage on the present occasion. Starting from her seat, Venetia looked at herself in the glass. The colour was coming back to her cheeks, and as she rapidly pictured to herself the enthusiasm with which her presence was about to inspire the patrician audience in the private theatre, a smile of triumph shone upon her features. Indeed, when she repaired to the greenroom, so animated were her looks, so gay was her smile, and so sprightly her wit, that no one would have fancied to what a degree of tension her feelings had been strung during the last half-hour.

CHAPTER VIII

A SINGULAR PROPOSAL

In the afternoon of the following day, just as the Marquis of Leveson was sitting down to lunch, a carriage drove up to the door of his mansion in Albemarle Street. Glancing forth from the window, he observed that it was Lady Sackville's equipage, and in less than a minute after the loud double knock had been given, one of his domestics entered to announce that her ladyship requested to speak to him for a single moment at her carriage window.

The marquis, instantaneously suspecting that his functions of self-constituted banker were about to be put into requisition again, chuckled within himself as he sped forth in compliance with the message he had just received, and assuming his most courteous demeanour, he approached the carriage.

Now, as a tall powdered lackey, who had descended from behind the vehicle the moment it stopped, was stationed so close that he could overhear whatever took place between his mistress and the marquis, she was of course compelled to be upon her guard. Accordingly, placing a small packet in the nobleman's hand, she said, "Sackville desired me to stop at your lordship's door, as I passed this way in the carriage, and deliver this packet into your own hand. I believe it is something valuable," she added, flinging a rapid and significant look upon the marquis, "and, by the bye, I think he told me there might be something to come back."

"Yes, a letter of acknowledgments and thanks for what his lordship has thus sent me," responded the marquis, "and which is doubly acceptable on account of being delivered by your ladyship's own fair hands. I will not

ask your ladyship to walk in, as Lady Ernestina is not at home."

"Indeed, I am somewhat pressed for time also," observed Venetia, affecting an air as courteous as if she were really on friendly terms with the nobleman and his niece, instead of loathing the former and hating the latter as heartily as possible.

"I will not detain your ladyship two minutes," said the marquis, and he hastened back into the mansion.

Ascending to his own chamber, he immediately examined the little packet which Venetia had placed in his hand, and he found that it contained ten of the pearls off the string of a hundred which he had presented to her.

"This makes fifteen that have already come back to me," he said to himself as he opened his writing-desk. "I wish that fellow Tash would manage to lead Sackville into deeper extravagances, but the captain declares that Horace is not so easy to be thus entangled. Still he is launching out into certain expenses which will soon involve him, and Tash says that he has some expensive affair of gallantry in hand, too, but he does not know with whom. I wonder whether Venetia wants this money for her husband?"

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson drew forth ten bank-notes each to the amount of a thousand pounds, and enveloping them in a sheet of paper, he sealed it and addressed it to Lord Sackville. Then, descending with it in his hand, he delivered it at the carriage window to Lady Sackville in such a manner that the footman who stood close by might read the direction, so that all suspicion of anything clandestine between himself and her ladyship would be averted.

The equipage drove away, and as it proceeded back to Carlton House, Venetia thought within herself, "Positively this must be the last time that I apply to that detested nobleman for pecuniary assistance. And yet he managed it delicately enough, so that the servants could not for an instant suspect there was anything strange in my calling at Leveson House."

On alighting at the palace, Venetia was informed that a lady had called by appointment and was waiting in the drawing-room. A ray of satisfaction lighted up her ladyship's lovely countenance, but before she proceeded to join

her visitress in the saloon, she ascended to her boudoir. There she tore open the letter which the marquis had put into her hand, and having satisfied herself that it contained the notes, she put five of them into her purse, and secured the other five in her writing-desk. Then, having laid aside her carriage-dress, she repaired to the drawing-room where the lady was waiting for her, and concerning whom we must pause to say a few words.

This lady was about three and twenty years of age, and was tolerably good-looking. She had fine hair of a dark brown colour, delicate features, which, without being exactly regular, were interesting, fine eyes, and a very beautiful set of teeth. Her figure was finely formed, — indeed, upon a somewhat large scale when considered in reference to the delicacy of her countenance. Altogether, she was of attractive appearance, and though quiet, genteel, and ladylike in her manners, she had not the polish of what is called " the best society." In that society she had nevertheless mingled for a time, but had not altogether caught its exquisite gloss. Indeed, it was not very difficult to perceive that she properly belonged to a sphere not so elevated. At the same time there was nothing vulgar about her; she was dressed with taste and what might be termed elegant neatness. Her voice was pleasing, and a slight tinge of melancholy gave additional interest to the expression of her countenance.

This lady was Mrs. Malpas, the daughter of a retired butcher, but she herself had never had any connection with the details of the business, having, on the contrary, been brought up in the manner which is usual with a rich tradesman's family. That is to say, she had received a good boarding-school education, so far as instruction and accomplishments went, but she had also learned a great deal of boarding-school nonsense. It was the influence of such sickly sentimentalism as this that was destined to rule the principal actions of her life, as the reader will soon see. She was the elder of several sisters (for she had no brothers), and had been left an heiress by an old bachelor uncle who accumulated a fortune in the pork and sausage line. When she left boarding-school and was duly " brought out " at a Mansion House entertainment, she of course engaged the notice of many admirers. But her fortune was

the principal, if not the sole attraction. Amongst her suitors were Colonel Malpas and the redoubtable Captain Tash. At that special moment the affairs of the former stood in particular need of a patching-up by means of a good matrimonial alliance, and as for the latter, there was no moment better than another for a fortune to fall into his hands. At first the young lady was inclined to listen most favourably to Captain Tash, because he not only had a tremendous pair of moustaches, but also the finest pair of whiskers possible, whereas Colonel Malpas had but a delicate moustache and slight whiskers. But, when it was made known to the sentimental young lady that the colonel was of much higher rank than the captain, that the former really moved in the best circles, whereas the latter only obtained admittance to them by an occasional accident, that the former was actually in the Guards, while the latter was on half-pay or else on no pay at all, she at once decided in favour of the colonel and cut the captain. Now Tash was not the man to stand this. He raged, fumed, bullied, and threatened to commit a wholesale slaughter in Butcherhall Lane, where the family resided. The young lady's father had him bound over to keep the peace, but the captain, in defiance of his recognizances, sent a challenge to Colonel Malpas. This the colonel would not accept, but had the captain locked up in prison for breaking the peace. However, the indefatigable Tash found bail again, emancipated himself from captivity, and threatened to expose the colonel's cowardice at every club in London. He even contrived to obtain a clandestine interview with the young lady, and made such an impression on her by his representations of the colonel's poltroonery and his own remarkable valour, that the sentimental miss, who had just been reading a romance of chivalry, thought that the captain was, after all, the hero into whose arms she ought to fling herself. A runaway match was therefore agreed upon, but the parents discovered all, the colonel was communicated with, and the young lady, overpersuaded once more, agreed to accompany Malpas at once to the altar. While the marriage ceremony was taking place, a discreet friend of the family sought an interview with Captain Tash, and broke to him the terrible tidings how he was thus forestalled by the colonel after all. The gallant captain pummelled the discreet friend within an inch of his life, and then

consented to receive a couple of thousand guineas as an inducement never to molest either the worthy folks in Butcherhall Lane or the newly married couple any more.

Such were the romantic and mysterious circumstances attending the alliance of Colonel Malpas and the porkman's heiress. In the hurry which characterized the proceedings, and in the " old people's " eagerness to save their daughter from the formidable adventurer, Captain Tash, and bestow her upon the aristocratic Malpas, no precaution had been taken to tie up her fortune in any way beneficial to herself. Malpas therefore obtained the whole and sole control thereof. But then the young lady's parents thought that all British officers were men of honour, and that the higher the rank the more superlative the honour; so that those good, easy, and addle-pated City folks had fancied at the time that Colonel Malpas of the Guards must be the very acme of honour itself. The parents and the daughter all learned the contrary to their cost; and when the young lady's fortune was spent, her husband a prisoner, the splendid mansion in Marlborough Street stripped from attic to kitchen by the unholy hands of sheriffs' officers, and she herself obliged to return home to her parents in Butcherhall Lane, the said parents began to suspect that it would have been much better if their daughter had espoused Mr. Simon Snuggs, the saddler, than Colonel Malpas of the Guards. But the young lady did not come to the same wise conclusion from past experience. On the contrary, she regretted the loss of the fine house in which she was her own mistress, and though she hated her husband and would not even open any of the letters he from time to time addressed to her, yet her bitterness toward him resulted rather from rancour at being expelled from her paradise through his extravagances than from the fact of his heartless conduct toward her. So that if he had suddenly become possessed of a fortune and had asked her to return to him, she would gladly have done so; or, on the other hand, if she herself picked up another dowry, she would very likely have sent to inform the colonel of the fact and invite him to return and enjoy it with her.

Such was Mrs. Malpas, the lady who now called upon Venetia in pursuance of a note forwarded by the latter to Butcherhall Lane in the forenoon.

"I have not had the honour of your acquaintance before," said Lady Sackville, adopting her most courteous demeanour and affable tone, "but I am rejoiced to have the present opportunity of forming it. Doubtless you were surprised to receive a note from me at all, but much more so to perceive by its contents that I have business of the utmost importance to speak upon. In that note I also suggested that you should maintain as strict a secrecy as possible relative to the fact of receiving it — "

"And I can assure your ladyship," said Mrs. Malpas, "that I did so. I happened to be alone at the time when the note was delivered, and neither my father nor mother is aware of my receiving it. I could not hesitate to obey the summons at the hour appointed, considering the kind and condescending tone in which the letter was written. Therefore, even before your ladyship breathes a syllable of the business alluded to, I beg to tender my sincerest thanks for your goodness toward me."

"My dear Mrs. Malpas," said Venetia, making the lady sit down upon the sofa by her side, and treating her with the familiar condescension so flattering to her vanity, "I am delighted to perceive that you appreciate beforehand my good intentions and friendly objects. Indeed, it is upon a very serious and delicate matter that I wish to discourse with you, and were you my own sister, I could not entertain a more sincere sympathy than I do toward you in respect to the unfortunate position in which you stand with regard to your husband, for it is on this point that we must deliberate."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Malpas, in evident surprise, "I fancied from something I had heard that your ladyship had every reason to entertain a serious animosity against my husband."

"What was it that you heard?" asked Venetia; "and from whom did you hear it? Let the fullest confidence subsist between us."

"By all means," exclaimed the colonel's wife, delighted at thus entering so speedily upon such familiar terms with the reigning star of fashion. "In answer, then, to your ladyship's questions, I must inform you that Captain Tash, whom I accidentally met a few weeks ago — "

"Ah! I understand," said Venetia, who knew full well that the captain was acquainted with Mrs. Malpas.

Indeed, it was from the captain's own lips — he having lately become a tolerably frequent visitor at Carlton House — she had gleaned all those particulars which we have ere now sketched, and which were so well calculated to give Venetia an insight into the character of Mrs. Malpas. We may add, it was from a knowledge of this character that Venetia had resolved upon the adoption of the course which she was now pursuing with respect to that lady.

"Captain Tash told me," continued Mrs. Malpas, "that my husband had been guilty of some very insulting conduct toward your ladyship, but the nature of which he did not explain."

"Were you not aware," asked Venetia, "that I once visited your house in Great Marlborough Street, on a certain night when Colonel Malpas entertained the prince regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others?"

"I heard something to that effect," responded Mrs. Malpas, "but I passed that memorable day — for such indeed it was to me — with my parents; and when I returned home to Great Marlborough Street in the evening, I found everything in such confusion that I took but little note of the rumours which met my ears. One fact was overwhelming enough — that ruin had overtaken my husband —"

"Well," interrupted Venetia, "we need not refer particularly to the past. It is, however, necessary for me to explain that Colonel Malpas had the presumption to declare his love for me at the period of which we have been speaking."

"I heard something to that effect," said Mrs. Malpas, "and really when I look at your ladyship, I am not surprised that any gentleman should fall in love with you. I could forgive my own husband for doing so, even were I devotedly attached to him."

"I must thank you for this compliment," said Lady Sackville, smiling. "But permit me to ask whether Captain Tash ever informed you of the part which he played —"

"I heard," interrupted Mrs. Malpas, "that the captain inflicted severe chastisement on my husband the night of the banquet at Great Marlborough Street; and I also under-

stood that it was in consequence of some boasting assertion, as unfounded as it was impudent, made by the colonel in reference to your ladyship. How true all this might be, I scarcely knew, for I was well aware that Captain Tash entertained a bitter hatred against the colonel and would gladly seek an opportunity to avenge himself."

"You occasionally see the captain, then?" said Venetia, beginning to suspect that there might be some little intrigue on the part of that gallant officer and the colonel's wife.

"No, my lady," was the answer, delivered with an unaffected sincerity which instantaneously showed Venetia that her suspicion was altogether unfounded. "I have only met him once for months past, and that was by accident. I was walking with two of my sisters at the time. Perhaps your ladyship has heard that before I was married to the colonel, Captain Tash made me an offer, but I am glad now — heartily glad — that I did not accept it. The stories I have heard of his dreadful violence, his outrageous conduct, the constant scrapes he is getting himself into, and his dissipated mode of life are enough to frighten one and would have been the death of me; for I am quite sure that all I have suffered through Malpas has not been half so bad as I should have endured if I had married Captain Tash."

"The captain is a good-hearted man," said Venetia, "but has all the bad qualities you mention. However, we have wandered from the topic of our discourse; and now, to resume it, I must observe that you are acquainted with a sufficiency of past events to understand how I had every reason to dislike your husband. Nevertheless, when he obtained his release from gaol some four months ago, I took compassion on him, I employed him in a secret mission to the Continent, and now that he has returned to London — "

"He is in London, then, at present?" exclaimed Mrs. Malpas. "I heard that he had gone abroad, but knew not of his return."

"He is only just come back," rejoined Venetia, "and I regret to say that his disposition is not changed for the better. Availing himself of the knowledge of certain secrets, which I should be sorry to have revealed, — secrets, however, you must understand, of a purely business character, — he has dared to use menaces and threats toward me — "

"But for what purpose?" asked Mrs. Malpas, whose

comprehension was not the quickest and the brightest in the world.

"Ah! with reluctance and sorrow do I unfold the truth to the injured wife of that unprincipled man," said Venetia, affecting a kind compassion toward her new acquaintance. "Nevertheless, the truth must be revealed, and when I tell you that Colonel Malpas seeks to compel me to submit to his will by means of threats, coercion, and terrorism — "

"Oh, this is shocking — this is dreadful!" cried Mrs. Malpas. "What must be done? How shall we act? He must be thwarted, he must be reduced to submission, you must be protected."

"That is precisely what I have been thinking," observed Venetia. "And indeed," she continued, after a little hesitation, "I had a certain plan in view — "

"Name it, name it," said Mrs. Malpas, "and if in any way I can assist your ladyship, you may rely upon my good offices."

"But before I explain myself," continued Venetia, "you must answer me a question. Do you feel disposed to live again with your husband, provided the means were supplied to furnish another establishment for you, and a handsome sum of ready money supplied to enable you to commence housekeeping again? Would you, in a word, leave your father's dwelling and return to the society of your husband under such favourable circumstances?"

"Yes, under such favourable circumstances," answered Mrs. Malpas, echoing Venetia's words. "Besides, if your ladyship recommends the adoption of that course, I at once agree to it," she added, seriously.

"Then listen to my plan," said Venetia, inwardly rejoicing at the lady's response. "You must make some excuse to your parents to be enabled to return to me this evening, and pass the night beneath this roof. When the colonel makes his appearance — which he will do — to claim from me an answer to his dishonourable suit, he shall be conducted to the room where you will be already installed, and I will take care that the door shall be closed upon him on the outside. You will thus pass the night together, and you will have an opportunity of giving him a real curtain lecture — "

"But such a lecture will be utterly thrown away upon

him," interrupted Mrs. Malpas. "He will only ridicule and laugh at me —"

"You do not exactly understand the nature of the lecture which you are to give to him," said Venetia. "I am well aware that to appeal to his moral feelings as a husband or as a man will be utterly useless, but to appeal to his selfishness may produce quite a different effect. You will tell him, then, that you are now upon intimate terms with me, and that it is my intention to introduce you into the highest circles and the best society. You will go on to observe that your father has agreed to allow you a thousand a year to live upon, and has given you five thousand guineas to furnish a mansion and commence the world anew, in order that you may live in independence, happiness, and comfort."

"But my father has done no such thing," exclaimed Mrs. Malpas, in astonishment, "and he would not do anything of the kind."

"No, but I will do it all for you," answered Venetia, "and you can attribute it to your parents' kindness —"

"But such goodness on your part," cried Mrs. Malpas, in amazement; "is it possible — are you joking —"

"It is no subject to jest upon," returned Venetia. "My dear friend," she continued, "can you not understand the object that I have in view? Your husband not only demands the surrender of my person, but also seeks to extort a large sum of money from me. Now you will not be angry if I declare that I so thoroughly hate and cordially detest your husband that I would sooner die than yield to his wishes on the first point, while, on the second, it would only encourage him to further extortion if I were to comply with his demand. You can now understand that it is well worth my while to adopt any course in order to save myself from that humiliation and that danger, and by the plan I am suggesting, you can likewise be restored to a position of comfort, respectability, and independence, without having to drag along your existence in Butcherhall Lane."

"Then what would your ladyship have me do?" asked Mrs. Malpas, now beginning to see clearly, like one who emerges from a dense fog.

"I would have you recite to your husband," continued Venetia, "the tale which I have ere now devised for the purpose, how I have taken you by the hand, how you are

to be introduced at court, how you have succeeded in inducing your father to make you independent, and how, for the sake of appearances, you are willing to forgive the past and dwell once more with your husband. He will greedily embrace your offer. The assurance that you possess an income of a thousand a year will bring him to your feet and make him promise to treat you with all possible kindness henceforth. But when you find him thus pliant and ductile, you must tell him that there is one condition which you have to impose as the basis of a future good understanding between you: namely, that inasmuch as you have conceived the utmost friendship for me, and as I have communicated to you your husband's infamous conduct toward me on the present occasion, you stipulate for a solemn agreement on his part to abstain from all molestation toward me in future."

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Malpas, now amazingly relishing the scheme which Lady Sackville had propounded. "The idea is excellent, and may be carried out to complete success."

"I felt persuaded you would embark in this friendly enterprise with me," said Lady Sackville. "I have already provided myself with the sum of five thousand pounds, which I will place in your hands this evening, and which you can show to the colonel not only as a proof of the tale you will tell him, but also as an inducement for him to yield to your views."

After some further discussion upon the details of the scheme the two ladies separated until the evening, Mrs. Malpas returning to Butcherhall Lane to devise some excuse for a night's absence from her parents' home, while Lady Sackville remained in the drawing-room pondering upon all that had just taken place.

In about half an hour her husband entered that apartment, and accosting her with mingled suspense and hesitation he said, "Well, Venetia, have you been enabled to comply with my request?"

"I have," she answered. Then drawing forth her purse, she produced the bank-notes which she had deposited there and handed them to her husband, at the same time observing, with one of her most enchanting smiles, "I am afraid you are getting rather extravagant, Horace. I hope that Captain Tash does not lead you into gambling or betting — "

"Venetia," interrupted Lord Sackville, somewhat haughtily, "if you mean to accompany your present with a lecture, pray take it back. I thought our agreement was that we should each pursue our own career with mutual independence, so long as we observed all the outward decencies of life and sustained proper appearances as on the part of man and wife."

"Such was our agreement," observed Venetia, with a still more winning smile, "and let it be adhered to. If I have given you offence or wounded your feelings, I am truly sorry. I was only fearful that as Tash is now frequently with you, and as he is not overparticular in his own pursuits — "

"Come, we will have no angry words nor remonstrances of any kind," said Horace, and thrusting the bank-notes into his pocket, he embraced his wife, renewed his thanks for the pecuniary succour she had afforded him, and then quitted the room.

CHAPTER IX

THE KEY UNDER THE MAT

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the evening, and if we look into the dining-room belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments at Carlton House, we shall find Lord Sackville himself, the prince regent, and Captain Tash seated at the table drinking curaçoa punch and playing cards for heavy stakes.

A domestic entered and handed Horace a note, with the whispered intimation that immediate attention was requested thereto. Lord Sackville, instantaneously recognizing the handwriting, begged his guests to excuse him while he perused the billet; and when his eyes had hastily scanned it over, he rose from his chair, exclaiming, "Your Royal Highness must excuse me, — and you also, captain, — but very particular business — "

"No doubt of it," said the prince, laughing, "it is a lady's handwriting, I'll be bound. Besides, any one could tell that much by the way the elegant little missive was folded."

"Yes, and I can scent the fragrance of it from here," said Tash. "'Tis perfumed with attar of roses."

"Be off with you, Horace," said the prince, still laughing. "Tash and I will continue the game together, for it seems that I have a run of luck this evening, since I have pocketed a cool thousand of your money, Horace."

"Another time you will give me my revenge, sir," replied Sackville; then, having intimated that it was very probable he should not return until a late hour, he quitted the room.

"Sackville has an intrigue on hand," observed the prince, as the door closed behind his youthful lord steward; "have you any idea who the fair one is? "

"Not in the least, sir," responded Tash. "He keeps it very close to himself, and I am not the man to pry into a friend's secrets. Daggers and bayonets! no, not I, for the world."

"You are no doubt an excellent fellow," said the prince, laughing. "Come, fill the tumblers. This punch is superfine."

The captain did as he was desired, and, having replenished the two glasses, he at once emptied his own, saying, "Well, I do think that this is an excellent brew. So here goes another just to drink the health of Sackville's fair one, whoever she may be. And by the bye," continued the captain, again replenishing his glass, "I must drink success to the amour, hoping that if there be a husband in the case he is not a jealous one."

"Ah! talking of women and gallantry," said the prince, "who was that lady that visited Lady Sackville this afternoon, and whom you bowed to as she passed through the hall to go out? You were coming in at the moment if you remember, and I was passing out of the council-chamber — "

"I recollect it," exclaimed Tash. "It was Mrs. Malpas."

"What — that scoundrel colonel's wife?" said the prince.

"The very same," responded the captain. "I knew her before she was Mrs. Malpas. In fact, between your Royal Highness, myself, and the post, I made love to her — "

"But what on earth can she have to do with Lady Sackville?" exclaimed the prince.

"Perhaps come to ask forgiveness for her husband, or something of the kind," said Tash. "She is such a soft, spoony, sentimental creature — "

"But she has a marvellous fine figure, though," said the prince, "and such a dainty foot and ankle. Upon my word, as she tripped through the hall, it quite made me feel in a state of excitement to observe those beautifully rounded ankles. Her bust, too, struck me as being very fine."

"There is no doubt, sir, she is a devilish nice woman," observed Tash. "So here's her health," and he again filled and emptied his glass, just as if it were a water-drinking instead of a punch-imbibing process.

"Her teeth, too, seemed to be very good," continued the prince. "I noticed her particularly as she turned with a half-smile to acknowledge your bow."

"Her teeth are magnificent," answered the captain. "I am very fond of fine teeth, so I am of this punch," and he refilled his glass. "But do you not intend, sir, to go on with the cards?"

"Not just for the moment," answered the prince; "let us talk of this Mrs. Malpas. She has somewhat struck my fancy, and if I thought —"

"I am well acquainted with Mrs. Malpas," said the captain, now penetrating the prince's views with regard to that lady, "and if I can do anything — your Royal Highness knows what I mean —"

"But what sort of a reputation does she bear?" asked the prince, catching the look of intelligence which the captain fixed upon him. "Is she quite correct, quite modest, very particular, and so forth?"

"I believe so, I never heard anything to the contrary," rejoined the gallant officer. "In fact, I am almost certain that she is a virtuous woman. But Lord bless you, sir," he continued, "if your Royal Highness only wishes to possess Mrs. Malpas, it could be easily managed, for she is such a soft, easy kind of creature that the bare idea of the honour which the prince regent would be doing her would overpower her at once and make her fall into your arms. But I wonder where Sackville has put his cigars."

"Ah! let us have a cigar," said the prince, "and we will discuss this matter about Mrs. Malpas."

The captain rose from his seat and searched in the sideboard drawers, on the mantel, and every place he could think of for Sackville's cigar-case, but it was not to be found.

"If you don't mind the trouble of going to my dressing-room," said the prince, — "you know where it is? — you will find some splendid cigars upon the mantel. Or you can ring and send to fetch them."

"No, I will go myself, sir," replied Tash, and thus speaking he issued forth from the dining-room.

It was now close upon eleven o'clock, and as the captain was proceeding along the passage to seek the prince's private apartments, he suddenly caught sight of Mrs. Malpas and Lady Sackville as they emerged together from the latter's boudoir. On observing the gallant officer advancing, the two ladies retreated into the room, doubtless fancying that

they were far enough off for Mrs. Malpas to have escaped recognition, and thus hastily reëntering the boudoir, they closed the door.

Captain Tash was struck by this circumstance. What could Mrs. Malpas be possibly doing in Carlton House? How was it that she had thus managed to place herself on such evident terms of intimacy with Venetia as to visit her twice in the same day? Not only was the captain's curiosity piqued, but he was likewise anxious to watch the motions of Mrs. Malpas in consequence of the discourse which he had held with the prince concerning her a few minutes back. He felt convinced that she was not now at the palace on a mere friendly visit to Lady Sackville, but that something savouring of intrigue or manœuvring was going on, — an opinion which seemed to be confirmed by the sudden withdrawal of the ladies on beholding him approach along the passage.

Casting his eyes hastily up and down the corridor, Captain Tash could see no place where to conceal himself, and for a few instants he stood irresolute how to act. But immediately behind where he had halted was a door that stood ajar, and without further hesitation, but at all risks, he stepped back, pushed open the door, and entered the place into which it led. Obscurity enveloped it, but from the beam of light which penetrated at the moment that he opened the door, he fancied that he caught the outlines of a couch and drapery, thus inducing the belief that it was a bedroom.

Here, with the door kept ajar, — that is to say, open to about the extent of an inch, — the captain ensconced himself, and listened with breathless attention. Two or three minutes passed, and all was still in the corridor. The captain now began to recollect that he had quitted the prince for the purpose of procuring cigars from his Royal Highness's dressing-room, and he was just thinking that he had better perform that errand and return to his royal companion, when he heard a door open gently higher up the passage. Motionless as a statue, and breathless as one too, did the captain remain at his post, and in a few moments he heard the rustling of female dresses and the gentle tread of light feet approaching from the direction where the door had opened. Almost immediately afterward he caught the soft murmur of voices, and the next moment the two ladies —

for he could now distinguish through the keyhole that there were two figures — stopped at the door of the room immediately opposite the one where he was stationed.

"This is the chamber, my dear friend," said a voice, which Captain Tash instantaneously discovered to be Venetia's; then, as she threw the opposite door open, she said, "Lights are burning and everything is prepared."

The two ladies then entered the chamber, and Captain Tash, still peeping through the keyhole of his own door, caught a glimpse of the countenance of Mrs. Malpas as she passed into that room, the door of which was immediately closed. For upwards of five minutes all was then still in the passage again.

Still Captain Tash remained at his post. What could this mean? Was Mrs. Malpas going to pass the night at Carlton House? If so, there would have been nothing very extraordinary in such a circumstance, supposing that she was on very intimate terms with Venetia and that no mystery was observed. But the captain, who was a thorough man of the world, knew full well that Mrs. Malpas was not the kind of woman that the intellectual Venetia would choose as a bosom friend, and he therefore argued that her ladyship was making use of the colonel's wife for some purpose or another. Besides, there was evidently a certain degree of mystery in the manner in which Mrs. Malpas had been conducted to that room; and thus everything seemed to corroborate the captain's first suspicion that something of a designing and covert nature was going on.

Such were the reflections that passed through his mind, as he still kept his post; and at the expiration of five minutes he heard female footsteps again coming down the passage. By aid of the convenient keyhole, the captain presently recognized Jessica, Venetia's maid, and by the stealthy manner in which this confidential abigail was threading the passage, as also from the importance expressed in her looks, Captain Tash felt more than ever assured that some strange manœuvring was really in progress and that Jessica had her part to perform in it.

Halting at the opposite chamber, Jessica gave a low knock, and Venetia immediately opened the door.

"Can I be of any assistance, my lady?" asked the abigail, in a voice which though subdued was nevertheless just loud

enough for Captain Tash's ears, sharpened as they were by his curiosity, to catch what she said.

"No, I have assisted Mrs. Malpas to undress," responded Venetia, also in a low tone, but which was nevertheless audible to the eavesdropping captain.

"Then shall I now go?" asked Jessica, with a significant look.

"Yes, it is eleven o'clock," said Lady Sackville, and closing the door again, she disappeared from the captain's view.

Jessica then tripped lightly along the passage, and in another minute or two Venetia came forth from the room opposite. But as she still held the door open in her hand, she looked back and said, in an encouraging tone, "Good night, my dear friend, and may the issue be as we anticipate."

She then came forward, closed the door, locked it, and placed the key under the fringed mat which was set against the threshold. Having done this, Venetia retraced her way along the passage, and in a few moments the sound of a door closing reached the ears of Captain Tash.

Feeling assured that she had entered some room, — most probably her boudoir, which the captain knew to be in that passage, — he issued forth from his place of concealment and hurried back to the apartment where he had left the prince regent.

"Well, what became of you?" demanded his Royal Highness. "You have been absent full twenty minutes, and I was just going to ring the bell and order a servant to look after you."

"Do not talk, sir, for Heaven's sake!" said Tash, evidently labouring under some strange kind of excitement. "Let me speak — there is not a moment to spare. The strangest adventure in all the world — "

"Well, what in the name of patience is it?" demanded the prince.

"Mrs. Malpas is here — beneath this roof," answered Tash. "She is going to pass the night here. She is at this moment alone in her bedroom, — a bedroom belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments, and Lady Sackville herself conducted her thither. I saw it all — I hid myself and listened — "

"Are you drunk or mad?" exclaimed the prince, surveying Tash in amazement.

"Neither," was the prompt reply, "and if any one but your Royal Highness had asked me such a question, in another moment I would have knocked his head off his shoulders. But come, will you avail yourself of this opportunity? It is a golden one. Daggers and wounds! don't hesitate, sir. I conjure you."

"But is it all true?" exclaimed the prince, now starting from his seat, and being somewhat inflamed with the punch which he had been drinking, his imagination instantaneously depicted to itself the pleasures of a new conquest.

"Will your Royal Highness be guided by me?" demanded Tash, impatiently. "Come, and if in a few minutes you are not clasped in the arms of that very fair one whom you coveted ere now, then may I be denounced as a liar, and may a stigma settle for ever on the name of Rolando Tash."

Not another moment did the prince hesitate. His imagination, already revelling in the sensuous joys which his prurient fancy conjured up, urged him on and stifled all scruples. As for what Venetia might say, — or whether she would ever discover the proceeding at all, — he paused not to reflect; his passions, now strongly aroused, were dominant for the time being.

Issuing forth from the apartment, the prince regent and Captain Tash proceeded along the passage together; and on reaching the chamber to which Mrs. Malpas had been introduced, the gallant officer stooped down and drew forth the key from beneath the velvet mat. This proceeding somewhat surprised the prince, for it naturally struck him as strange that the key should be there. But the captain placed his finger upon his lip, and his Royal Highness said not a word. The next moment the key was introduced into the lock by the hand of the gallant officer, the door was opened, and the prince regent without another instant's hesitation stepped in.

Captain Tash then closed the door, locked it, put the key into his pocket, and once more concealed himself in the room opposite; for he felt convinced that the key had been placed beneath the mat by Venetia to aid the intrigue which was

going on and he was resolved to wait and see the issue thereof, if possible.

Here we must leave the gallant officer and follow the prince regent into the chamber which had been assigned by Lady Sackville to Mrs. Malpas.

CHAPTER X

THE ROYAL INTRUDER

The couch in the chamber was so situated, with the drapery drawn around it, that as the prince entered he could not immediately perceive the lady who occupied it. Wax candles were burning upon the table, and gently drawing back the curtain, his Royal Highness cast a hurried and anxious look upon Mrs. Malpas. We say anxious, because he was fearful at the moment that on recognizing him she might scream forth.

But the lady had her eyes fast closed, and indeed was pretending to be asleep. By the advice of Venetia she had placed herself in a manner which, with all the appearance of an unstudied abandonment, had the effect of displaying her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. As a matter of course she fancied that it was her husband who had just entered, and as Malpas was to be introduced there under the impression that it was the lovely Venetia whom he would find in readiness to receive him, it was as a matter of calculation that Mrs. Malpas had disposed herself in the most provoking attitude, so as to enthral those desires which the idea of possessing Venetia would no doubt excite in the colonel's breast. She feigned to be asleep, too, in order that her husband (as she supposed him to be) might have leisure to collect his thoughts and see the necessity of putting the best possible face on the disappointment thus in store for him, and likewise that he might have an opportunity of contemplating those charms which his wife, with a very pardonable vanity, flattered herself could not be altogether without an effect upon him after so long a separation.

But the prince, not knowing anything of all these matters,

— neither why Mrs. Malpas was there at all, nor whom she expected, — supposed her to be really sleeping, and with a quick glance swept over the couch did he observe all that was sensuously exciting and voluptuously provocative in the abandonment of her person as she had thus disposed herself. One white and well-rounded arm was curved above her head, her dark brown hair flowed negligently over the pillow, her shoulders and bust were uncovered, and her other arm lay upon the coverlid, the folds and plaits of which developed the symmetry of the lower limbs, thus delineating the fine modelling of their proportions. The flush of excitement was upon the lady's cheeks, and the moist lips, which she held apart the better to feign slumber, revealed two rows of pearly teeth.

Such was the delicious spectacle which greeted the prince's eyes as he slowly drew aside the curtains. But not for many moments did he suffer his looks to linger on the lady whom he believed to be sleeping soundly. His desires were worked up to the highest pitch, the blood seemed to boil in his veins. It was not an intoxication, but a delirium of pleasure that seized upon him, for these were ever the sensations which the royal voluptuary experienced when a new conquest seemed about to crown his triumphs in the wars of love. Burning, therefore, with impatience to profit by the present golden opportunity, and fearful that the lady might awake and scream out in the sudden fright of beholding a man in her room, he at once advanced on tiptoe up to the table and snuffed out the candles. This proceeding was accomplished so suddenly that although Mrs. Malpas opened her eyes at the first click of the snuffers, yet the second candle was extinguished ere she had time to observe that the individual was not her husband. She just caught sight of the form as it stood by the table, but almost at the same moment the room was enveloped in darkness, so that she perceived not the definite outline of that male shape.

"Percy," she now said, in a low and tremulous tone, as she pretended to awaken up, "we thus meet again. But little, little did you expect to behold me here," she continued, in accents of mild and gentle reproach. "Ah! were you not astonished when your eyes fell upon the occupant of this couch, and instead of the magnificent form of Lady Sackville

you beheld me, your wife, her whom you have neglected and whom you have perhaps fancied to be your enemy. But wherefore did you extinguish those lights so suddenly? Is it that I am loathsome and hateful to you, that you cannot bear to look upon me? Or is it that you yourself feel remorse for the past and shame for the present, and dare not meet my gaze? If it be so, — and sincerely, most sincerely do I hope it is, — then is there reason to expect that all the best feelings of your nature are not extinguished within you. But wherefore do you not answer me? Ah! you are astounded at this unexpected meeting with me, or perhaps you are listening in silent disgust and scorn at what you may haply deem a vulgar curtain-lecture? But suppose that I have good news for you? Suppose that I could tell you of wealth and prospects of happiness? Would you not listen to me with feelings of interest then? "

The reader can perhaps imagine far better than we can describe the sudden stupefaction which seized upon the prince when Mrs. Malpas first began to speak, — indeed, as the very opening word she uttered fell upon his ears. That word was a name, the name of Percy, her husband's Christian name. The truth flashed to the mind of the prince in a moment: it was her husband whom she was expecting there. That stupefaction became a positive consternation as she went on speaking. He saw that she fancied she was addressing herself to her husband, whom she was disposed to forgive for his past offences toward her; and he felt that this was scarcely the mood in which a woman could bear to be told that it was not the husband whom she expected, but an interloper who had sought her presence by stratagem and was now listening to her in the dark.

But still something must be done. For a moment the prince thought of beating a quick retreat, but then he recollected that he had heard Tash lock the door behind him, and deep was the imprecation which in the depth of his soul the royal voluptuary vented on the head of the officious captain who had brought him into this strange dilemma.

Retreat was therefore impossible, and yet again recurred the thought that something must be done. The lady was still going on talking, still delivering herself of those expressions which we have just now recorded. The prince grew more and more bewildered. She had asked why the candles

were extinguished. What on earth could he say? She then asked him why he did not speak to her. Again, what in the name of goodness was he to say? And yet something must be done. The position was growing fearfully critical. If he revealed himself, would she alarm the whole palace with her cries? Suddenly the prince regent recollected what Tash had told him relative to her being of a disposition that would sink overwhelmed beneath the honour of the royal favour, and inspired by the cheering hope, the prince resolved to do his best in bringing the present dilemma to a tranquil and peaceful issue. Advancing therefore to the couch, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips, but without uttering a word, and this was done at the instant she reached that part where her speech broke off as above indicated.

"Ah! I am glad," she continued, "that you are not filled with anger and vexation at the disappointment you have experienced. At all events, let me beseech you to sit down by the side of the couch, and talk seriously and deliberately with me — By the bye, you have shaved off your moustache," she observed, forgetting for the moment that she ought to be playing a grave and sentimental part; but the natural frivolity of her character would thus break out in spite of herself, in spite, also, of the tutorings she had received from Lady Sackville. "And let me tell you that your hand is not quite so smooth as it used to be, it is somewhat wrinkled — Heavens! what a dissipated life you must have been leading to have got your hand so wrinkled during the short space of a few months. Let me see, it was in October last year when we separated, and this is the end of April — But why have you withdrawn your hand?"

The prince, thinking that the moment was not quite come yet for revealing himself, patted her cheek three or four times with the palm of the hand which he had just withdrawn from the grasp of her own fair fingers, and then feeling for the chair at the side of the couch, he sat down.

"Now, my dear Percy," resumed the lady, "I have a proposal to make to you, which you may accept if you will, and I do not think you will refuse it. Suppose that no affection subsists between us, yet for decency's sake should we live together like man and wife, if not as man and wife. But you will ask me about our means. Now let me tell you that I am better off than you fancy. I have got five

thousand pounds which my father has given me, and I have brought them hither with me to show you, and thus convince you that I am telling the truth. Only you have put out the lights, and I cannot conceive why — "

By this time the prince had collected his scattered and bewildered ideas in such a way that his passions had also flamed up once more. His imagination pictured to itself this lady as he had seen her when first entering the room, in that voluptuous abandonment of her person which had excited his desires to almost a frenzied degree, and through the deep darkness of the chamber did he now behold her with his mental vision. And he was close by her, he was seated against the couch on which she lay. If he stretched out his hand it would encounter a warm, plump arm or a heaving bosom, if he leaned forward he would inhale the fragrance of her breath, and a perfume of sensuousness seemed to float around him, intoxicating his brain with its influence.

He again took her hand, he pressed it to his lips; then he kissed her cheeks — But ah! a sudden and a half-stifled cry escaped her lips as she feels something cold touch her naked breast with a sensation as if it were a weapon about to inflict death from a murderous hand. It is the star which the prince had worn in the afternoon when holding a Privy Council, and which he had kept upon his coat. The lady's fingers, instinctively seeking for the object that sent a thrill through her bosom, felt the star, and a terrible suspicion instantaneously flashed to her mind.

" Good God! who is it? " she exclaimed, but in a half-stifled, hysterical voice, as she convulsively pushed the prince away from her.

" Fear not, dear lady, I am the prince," was the quick, we might almost say, the galvanic response, for his Royal Highness felt that this was the crisis of the adventure.

" The prince! " repeated Mrs. Malpas, in a sort of suffocating tone.

" Yes, the prince, who loves, who adores you," resumed the royal voluptuary, with electric haste, as he once more seized her hand and pressed it to his heart. " Yes, dearest lady, I am one who can appreciate your charms, who will love and cherish you, treat you with kindness, raise you to distinction, place you upon a pedestal amidst the beauties

of rank and fashion, — in a word, do everything that may convince you of the depth and the sincerity of his passion. Tell me, then, tell me, is not the love of your prince, the love of him who will one day be your sovereign, better than the society of a worthless, unprincipled fellow like your husband?"

"Ah! my husband," ejaculated the lady, in sudden alarm. "Does he know that you are here?"

"No, Heaven forbid that I should compromise you!" exclaimed the prince.

"But he will come, then! Every moment he may come!" said the lady, in accents convulsed with dread. "Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do?"

"Summon your fortitude to your aid," hastily responded the prince, now snatching a thousand little liberties as he caught the terrified lady in his arms and strained her to his breast. "Should Malpas indeed come, answer him at the door, tell him you have thought better of it, and that you will not receive him."

"But he fancies that it is Lady Sackville whom he is coming here to meet," said Mrs. Malpas, not reflecting whether there were any harm in making this statement. "Your Royal Highness must understand," she continued, hurriedly, "that my wicked husband wished to coerce her ladyship, and her ladyship placed me here to receive him in her stead."

"So I understood from the opening observations which you made when I first entered the room," said the prince. "But hush! some one approaches."

The prince and Mrs. Malpas now held their breath to listen, and they distinctly heard footsteps pause suddenly just outside the door. Then there was a rustling of a gown, accompanied by a groping about underneath the mat at the threshold, which sounds indicated clearly enough that some one was looking for the key which had ere now been concealed there. These sounds were followed by low whispers. The door was tried next, but as it remained immovable a gentle tap was given.

Then, in the lowest possible accent, did the prince whisper certain rapid instructions to Mrs. Malpas, and issuing from the couch she felt her way through the darkness to the door, and said, in a low tone, "Who is there?"

"'Tis I, with the colonel," responded the voice of Jessica on the outside of the door.

"Bid the colonel depart as he came. I have changed my mind, I will have nothing to do with him," replied Mrs. Malpas, speaking through the keyhole, and in accents so low that it was impossible for the colonel, who was with Jessica, to recognize the voice of his wife.

Immediately after she had given utterance to these words, Mrs. Malpas turned away from the door and was caught in the arms of the prince, who strained her to his breast; but he felt that she was trembling all over, while her heart was beating quickly and her bosom was palpitating violently with the excitement of the present scene.

"Now let them all think what they like and do what they like," murmured the prince in the lady's ear, as he bore her back to the couch.

But just at this moment a strange noise, resembling a sudden rush and a short scuffle in the passage, just outside the door, reached the ears of his Royal Highness and Mrs. Malpas. They listened with suspended breath; a door closed opposite, and then all was still once more.

"What could that be?" asked Mrs. Malpas, in a suffocating tone, and again trembling with the excitement of alarm and suspense.

"Nothing that concerns us," responded the prince, straining her with still more frantic violence in his arms, as if by the very power of his caresses he sought to lull the trembling of her form and the fluttering of her heart.

But he could not help thinking at the moment that the noise in the passage which had just startled them was some freak or achievement on the part of his coadjutor in this night's adventure, the redoubtable Captain Tash.

CHAPTER XI

THE FEMALE GARB

In consequence of the colonel's watch having stopped, he was about twenty minutes later than the hour of appointment at the private door of the palace, and Jessica therefore had to wait his arrival. When he made his appearance, she chided him for this delay, but he at once explained the cause, expressing his deep sorrow for the circumstance.

The abigail led him up into the passage communicating with the Sackvilles' suite of apartments, and on reaching the door of the chamber where, as we have already seen, Mrs. Malpas and the prince were together, Jessica stooped down and felt for the key. But it was not there, and for a moment she thought that perhaps Lady Sackville might have either forgotten to place it under the mat, or, on a second thought, had purposely left it inside. Malpas inquired in a low whisper wherefore Jessica seemed bewildered, and she hurriedly explained that she was searching for the key of the apartment. This was the whispering that the prince and Mrs. Malpas had overheard, as already described.

Jessica now tried the handle, but, as we have also stated, the door moved not. Then she tapped gently, and when answered she intimated in a low voice that Colonel Malpas was with her, whereupon, to her own amazement and to the mingled rage and disappointment of the colonel himself, a voice from inside, and which he supposed to be Venetia's, announced a change of mind and ordered Malpas to depart.

Jessica actually staggered back from the door, and turning her eyes upon the colonel, she saw that he was pale with rage and quivering from head to foot.

" Stop," she said, " there is some mistake. I must go and see. Remain here for a single moment, and if you meet

anybody, say you have come to see Lord Sackville, or your old butler, Plumpstead, or anybody else, so long as you invent some excuse."

Then having delivered these instructions with nervous haste, Jessica tripped away, hurrying along the passage to Venetia's boudoir, which she immediately entered.

But scarcely had the door of that sanctuary closed behind the lady's-maid, when the colonel, who was standing irresolute and bewildered where she had left him, was suddenly seized upon by two powerful arms, and the ejaculation of alarm which rose to his lips was stifled by a hand being placed on his mouth. Glancing around at the individual who had thus surreptitiously assailed and mastered him, he recognized the moustached and whiskered countenance of the formidable Captain Tash.

For a moment the colonel struggled desperately to extricate himself, but the captain lifting him in his arms, and still maintaining one hand forcibly held over his mouth, carried him into the room whence he had thus so suddenly emerged. There, as the captain immediately closed the door behind him, they were enveloped in utter darkness, but as the colonel felt himself released from the powerful gripe of his assailant, he heard that formidable individual's voice breathe a terrible threat in his ears.

"If you dare cry out, or move without my leave," said the captain, "I will cut you into mince-meat."

Malpas was overwhelmed with terror. What could all this mean? Had he been inveigled into a trap to be ill-treated, perhaps murdered? Every circumstance seemed to confirm his belief that treachery was intended him. That seeming inability of the lady's-maid to find the key of the room opposite, the announcement from within that room, and which he of course believed to have been made by Venetia, the abrupt manner in which Jessica had left him, the sudden assault made on him by Tash, and now this forcible carrying him off into a place where a pitchy darkness prevailed, together with a knowledge of the desperate character of the man himself and the conviction that there was a deep personal animosity existing on that individual's part against him, all these circumstances were but too well calculated to fill even a braver man than Malpas with suspicions of treachery.

"For Heaven's sake do not hurt me," he said, so soon as he could recover the power of speech, "and I will do whatever you order me."

"You sneaking, grovelling, despicable coward," exclaimed Tash, who entertained the most cordial hatred for the colonel, "what a pretty figure you are doubtless cutting now, if I had but a light to see you!"

"Oh, do get a light, Captain Tash," implored Malpas, to whom the darkness was fraught with indescribable terrors, for he every instant fancied that some assassin blow would be dealt him. "I know that it serves me very right, what you are doing or what you intend to do, but, for Heaven's sake, forgive me, and I swear by everything sacred that I will molest Lady Sackville no more."

"Ah! you will swear that, will you?" said the captain, who now began to have a dim, though still very dim, idea of the truth relative to this night's adventure. At all events, it struck him that there was plot and counterplot on the part of Malpas and Venetia respectively, and of course the captain, for more reasons than one, was well disposed to take the part of Lady Sackville. "And so you swear," he accordingly said, "that you will never molest her ladyship again?"

"Yes, I swear, I swear most solemnly," said the colonel, still in accents indicative of the profoundest alarm. "Therefore I beseech you to spare me, I implore you not to do me a mischief, nor to suffer one to be done me."

"Well, it was my intention," observed Captain Tash, delighted to have the opportunity of torturing the wretched coward, "to cut your throat from ear to ear."

"O horror!" groaned the colonel, and the captain heard him fall upon his knees. "For God's sake don't, don't!" and his teeth chattered audibly.

"But if I spare you," said Tash, "if I lay aside this great butcher's knife that I have just now got in my hand —"

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched colonel, who felt that his hair was standing on end, while from head to foot the cold perspiration broke out all over him.

"And devilish sharp it is, too," added Tash, inwardly chuckling at this cruel revenge he was inflicting upon his enemy.

"No, no, you will not, you cannot perpetrate this atrocity.

Heavens! could Lady Sackville have prompted you to do it?" exclaimed the miserable man.

"How dare you, then, molest her?" demanded Tash. "Gibbets and daggers! thunder and wounds! didn't you have enough of it that night when I thrashed you in your own hall?"

"For Heaven's sake, name your conditions and let me go," said the colonel, in a voice of anguished entreaty. "What can I do? What guarantee can I offer you? What security can I give that I will fulfil your terms?"

"Ah! that's the difficulty," observed Tash. "If I let you go now, you will only renew your tricks again another time. But ah! here is a tinder-box," he suddenly exclaimed, "and we will throw a light upon the matter."

Thus speaking, the gallant officer, by the aid of the flint and steel, soon lighted a candle which was standing on the mantel, where his hand had accidentally come in contact with the materials for thus procuring that light, and as his eyes now swept around, he perceived, as he had already suspected, that the scene of the present episode was a bedchamber. But it was a small one, and by no means handsomely though still very neatly furnished, while several articles of feminine apparel, such as cotton gowns, caps, and so forth, showed that it was a chamber belonging to some female dependent, most likely one of Lady Sackville's maids. On the floor the colonel was still kneeling, his countenance ghastly pale, his lips ashy white and quivering, his hands joined, and his whole appearance denoting the most excruciating terror. But as the light shone upon the scene, and the colonel observed that the place into which he had been borne was only a bedchamber and had not the slightest appearance of a human slaughter-house, and, moreover, as Captain Tash did not appear to be brandishing the sharp butcher's knife whereof he had spoken, the colonel recovered somewhat of his presence of mind, and, slowly rising from his knees, he said, "I did not think that you would carry your dreadful threats into execution, after all."

"Don't be too sure," exclaimed the captain, fixing upon him his fiercest look. Then, putting his hand underneath his coat-tails, he said, "It was through merciful considerations that I put away the knife before I lit the candle, but if you think that I am not capable of inflicting a ghastly punish-

ment upon you, then, by all the cannons and bayonets, I will very soon show you the contrary," and he made a movement as if about to draw forth the formidable knife from his coat-pocket.

"No, no!" ejaculated the colonel, "spare me, spare me! Tell me what you require, and I will at once accede to your demands."

Suddenly the thought struck Captain Tash that it would be gratifying his revenge and ministering to his facetious sense of amusement at the same time if he were to put a crowning ignominy upon the grovelling coward whom he so loathed and detested. No sooner did the idea thus strike him than he resolved to carry it into execution, and assuming his most ferocious aspect, he exclaimed, "There is but one condition on which I will spare you."

"Name it, name it," eagerly cried the colonel.

"That you put on this gown and this cap," said Tash, pointing to the articles of female apparel which he thus specified, "and that you go forth from the palace in this garb."

"Good heavens! you cannot be serious?" said the colonel, in dismay.

"Ten thousand thunders!" exclaimed the captain, "I never was more serious in my life. Come, be quick, or, by Heaven! the butcher's knife —"

"Oh, don't, don't," groaned the colonel, a cold tremor passing visibly over him.

"Then be quick, I say," said the captain, again thrusting his hand in a menacing manner beneath his coat-tails to grasp the visionary butcher's knife.

"Yes, yes," said Malpas, in such a flutter of cowardly excitement that he scarcely knew what he was doing.

"Now, then, let me be your handmaid," said Tash, and stripping off the colonel's coat and waistcoat, he made him put on the gown which was hanging to the wall, and also a cap with gay ribbons that lay upon a chest of drawers. "And now go forth, you miserable coward!" exclaimed Tash, laughing tauntingly as he opened the door and pushed out the unhappy colonel into the passage.

But here we must pause for a few minutes, in order to return to Jessica after she left Malpas and went to seek her mistress in the boudoir. There she found Venetia seated

alone, very far from suspecting the many incidents and episodes that were growing out of the main adventure which she had planned for this memorable night.

On beholding her abigail enter, Venetia turned indolently around upon the sofa where she was more reclining than sitting, and said, " Well, I suppose it is all right? "

" Heavens! no, my lady," was the startling response.

" Ah! what then is the matter? " demanded Venetia, now springing from the sofa as she observed the singular expression of the faithful Jessica's looks.

" I cannot comprehend it," was the abigail's quick response. " The key is gone, the door is still locked, and Mrs. Malpas, from inside the room, declares she has changed her mind."

" What! " cried Venetia, in dismay, " is it possible? "

" Yes, and she says that the colonel may go whence he came," added Jessica.

" But you must be dreaming, you must have gone to the wrong room."

" Impossible, my lady; 'tis the spare bedroom."

" Yes, but you must have misunderstood Mrs. Malpas, then," said Venetia, catching at any hypothesis to account for the extraordinary tale she had just heard from Jessica's lips.

" I can assure your ladyship that it is as I say," rejoined the maid.

" And the colonel, where is he? " demanded Venetia, quickly.

" I have left him standing in the passage while I came to ask your instructions. What is to be done? "

" I know not, I am bewildered," responded Venetia. " But, at all events, the colonel must not be left there. Go and get him away, induce him to depart. Invent some excuse, say anything. Tell him to come and see me to-morrow. Haste, haste, Jessica! He must not be allowed to loiter there."

The abigail issued from the boudoir, closing the door behind her. But the moment she thus emerged into the passage she saw that it was empty. No one was there. She hesitated what to do, and she was about to return into the boudoir and report this new circumstance to Venetia, when it struck her that the colonel might have been afraid to

tarry in the passage any longer and had sought his way back to the private door. But as Jessica had locked that door and kept the key in her possession when she gave him admittance ere now, she at once felt the necessity of hastening thither to afford him egress. But on arriving at the private door she saw no one, and again pausing for a few moments, she reflected what was to be done now. Had he lost his way somewhere in the palace? This appeared most probable, and Jessica went wandering through every passage and corridor, to satisfy herself on the point. Thus did she lose nearly twenty minutes, during which the scene between the colonel and Captain Tash was taking place.

Let us now return to Venetia. When left alone in the boudoir by Jessica, she sat down again upon the sofa to reflect on the singular behaviour of Mrs. Malpas. When Venetia parted from that lady it was with the hope, as cordial as it seemed mutual, that the issue of the adventure would be satisfactory, and indeed all Lady Sackville's previous tutorings had been received with the best possible grace by Mrs. Malpas. How, then, could she have so suddenly changed her mind? Was she a woman as vacillating as she was frivolous, as variable as she was weak-minded? To no other conclusion could Venetia come. But the key which had been placed under the mat, how had it disappeared? Even supposing that Mrs. Malpas had thought better of the matter and had resolved at the last moment not to play the part which she had undertaken, still she could not have possessed herself of the key to secure the door against the possibility of intrusion. She had been locked inside the room, and the key had been placed under the mat outside. It was therefore physically impossible she could have possessed herself of it. Then what had become of that key?

Venetia was utterly bewildered. She knew not what to think, and yet a vague and feebly glimmering suspicion was dawning in her mind that something had taken place beyond the scope of her present conjecture. Indeed, she could not help thinking that if anybody of the male sex had found the key, had penetrated into the chamber, and had made himself agreeable to Mrs. Malpas, the mystery would be cleared up at once. The reader is already aware that Lady Sackville was quick-witted, sharp, and intelligent beyond

even the ordinary shrewdness of her sex, and thus was it that she looked further than her first conjectures for a solution of the occurrence which had so much bewildered her.

Having once experienced the glimmering of suspicion, Venetia was not long in thinking of the means which would either confirm or refute it. Issuing from the boudoir, she crept stealthily along the passage, and was about to listen at Mrs. Malpas's door when the sounds of male voices, apparently in altercation and coming from the room opposite, somewhat alarmed her. These voices were in reality the colonel's and captain's, but as the door was shut, Venetia recognized them not. Wondering what was the meaning of that apparent quarrelling, and who the men could be, — for it was her housemaid's apartment whence the voices issued, — Venetia hurried back to her boudoir, for she did not choose to run the risk of being seen loitering about in the passage.

But now, why did not Jessica return? Where was she? What was she doing? What could be detaining her? Twenty minutes had elapsed, and still she returned not. Lady Sackville grew nervous and impatient. Those male voices in her housemaid's room had filled her with fresh misgivings, and she almost regretted that she had not entered to ascertain who the individuals were. Her uneasiness became intolerable, and she resolved to sally forth again in search of Jessica. But just at the moment when she opened the boudoir door a second time, she beheld what she took to be a female figure issue from her housemaid's room, and instantaneously recognizing that servant's cap and cotton dress, Venetia called her, in a peremptory manner, by name. She then turned hurriedly back into the boudoir, for her excitement was increased at the idea that the housemaid herself had been present in the room with the men, whoever they were, that had been speaking in such angry tones.

Here we must pause for a moment to observe that the housemaid was a very tall, gawky young woman, and thus was it that, in the excitement and confusion of her ideas, Venetia did not notice at the instant that the figure which emerged so suddenly from the room farther down the passage was much too tall even for the overgrown housemaid. But, on the other hand, what was the surprise of Colonel Malpas — for he it was, dressed in the female apparel — on

beholding Lady Sackville emerge, not from the room opposite, but from one higher up the passage? The colonel heard her pronounce a female name, followed by an imperious, "Come hither!" and he instantaneously perceived that it was he himself who was thus taken by Venetia for some servant-maid.

A sudden change came over the colonel, for he felt all in a moment that the opportunity was now serving him. A glance rapidly flung behind showed that the captain had closed the door of the little chamber on ignominiously kicking him out of it, for the gallant officer intended to remain concealed in that room at least until he thought the colonel had had time enough to get clear out of the palace, so that the authorship of this ludicrous sport might not be suspected. For Captain Rolando Tash had a certain opinion of his own dignity, and did not choose to compromise it by being discovered in the act of engendering such a practical joke as this.

Thus was it that all in a moment the wheel of fortune made a complete revolution, and circumstances transpired in favour of the colonel. Captain Tash had shut the door, Jessica was still prosecuting her search in other parts of the palace, and Venetia was in a room close at hand. Thither therefore did the colonel speed without another instant's hesitation, all his recent fears being absorbed in the hope of coming triumph. The moment he appeared on the threshold of the boudoir, Venetia, who had returned to her seat on the sofa, started up and gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm, for at the very first moment that tall figure appeared in the doorway, she saw that it was not the housemaid, but a man in female apparel, and the next moment she recognized the colonel.

But even while that ejaculation was still thrilling from her lips, Malpas closed the door, locked it, and drew forth the key. Then, tearing off the cap and gown, he secured the key in his breeches pocket, exclaiming, in a tone of mingled malice and triumph, "Now, Venetia, you are in my power."

"Where have you been, and what means this masquerading frippery?" demanded Lady Sackville, still maintaining a bold front, although she felt that she was now entirely in the colonel's power.

" Ah! your ladyship was guilty of a cruel perfidiousness," exclaimed the colonel, " in letting that scoundrel Tash loose upon me. But enough of the past; the present absorbs all considerations."

" Tash, did you say? " exclaimed Venetia. " Have you, then, met the captain within these walls? "

" How can you pretend ignorance on that head? " rejoined Malpas. " Was not the villain posted in the very room opposite that where you were just now? Ah! you did not think it enough to make a dupe and a fool of me, and to tell me from inside the door of one room that you had changed your mind, but you must set that whiskered bravo to lay wait in another room to steal forth, pounce upon me when your maid left me, and then, after the most terrible threats, compel me to put on this debasing attire. Ah! Lady Sackville, it was too bad, it was too bad! But the moment of triumph, I might almost say revenge, has now come."

And thus speaking he literally sprang upon Venetia, threw his arms around her splendid neck, and despite her struggles, covered her face, her shoulders, and her bosom with his hot and burning kisses.

" Release me, villain! " she said, in accents half-stifled with rage, " or I will scream."

" Scream, then," cried Malpas. " Bring the whole household hither, and I will proclaim all I know, — that Curzon is your paramour — "

" O villain that you are! " exclaimed Venetia, now seeming like a tigress goaded to fury. " But I will have a terrible revenge," and flinging him from her with a force which would even have been tremendous for a man and was perfectly marvellous for a woman, she sprang toward the table where a silver fruit-knife was laying.

Malpas, whose passions of revenge, malignity, and desire were all aroused to the highest pitch, was armed with that brutish energy which, under such circumstances, supplies the place of real courage on the part of the coward, and he was perfectly desperate in his resolve to gratify his maddening impulses. Quick as thought did he divine her intention as she sprang to the table, and bounding forward even more swiftly than she, he clutched the knife.

" Venetia," he cried, instantaneously turning upon

her and brandishing the knife over her head, "I am desperate, you have goaded me to madness, your insults — "

"For God's sake, be reasonable, Malpas," she exclaimed, her cheek now growing pale with terror as she saw indeed that he was furiously excited.

"Don't talk to me of reason," he said, in a voice that was hoarse with concentrated passions. "Yield yourself to me, or, by all the powers of hell, I swear — "

"Put away that knife, I beseech, I implore you," cried Venetia, fearful that he was really going mad.

"No," he rejoined, in the same thick, hoarse accents as before, "for you are so experienced in trickery — Besides," he suddenly exclaimed, in a clearer and more excited voice, "I know full well that you will not surrender yourself through love, and that therefore it must be through fear."

"But if I do surrender, will you keep all my secrets?" asked Venetia, scarcely able to repress the accents of anguish and despair which rose up from her very heart's core to mingle with the tones of her voice.

"Assume a friendly demeanour toward me," answered Malpas, in a milder manner than before, "and I shall be friendly toward you. Ah! dear lady, if we could only forget the past and enjoy the present, the future should never be embittered, so far as you are concerned, by word or deed of mine."

"I accept the assurance," responded Venetia, whose feelings at this moment were not enviable even by a person about to be hanged, "and I surrender. Hush, hush!" she immediately added, in a lower voice, "some one is at the door."

"No treachery, mind," said the colonel, in a deep whisper, as he clutched her violently by the arm.

"You shall see whether I intend it," rejoined Venetia. Then as a second rap was heard at the door, she advanced toward it, and said, "Is it you, Jessica?"

"Yes, my lady," was the answer given by the abigail outside.

"You may retire," Venetia immediately said; "there is nothing more to be done to-night."

Having thus spoken, the proud, the brilliant, the envied,

and the worshipped Lady Sackville turned toward the man whom she detested, and on whom she now cast her troubled, humiliated, and submissive looks with an air as if she were gazing upon destiny itself.

CHAPTER XII

THE HUSBAND'S RETURN

We must now direct the reader's attention to Lord Sackville, whom we have seen sallying forth at about half-past ten on this memorable night in consequence of a letter which he received. That billet, written in an elegant female hand and so sweetly perfumed, was from the Countess of Curzon, and ran as follows:

"Ten o'clock at night.

"It is absolutely necessary, my dear Horace, that I should see you to-night; and as we must have a long conversation together, perhaps you will be enabled to afford me the pleasure of your society for a few hours. The usual arrangements can be carried into effect, so that the domestics need not suspect anything. Gertrude, who will deliver this note at Carlton House, will afterward proceed to our amiable and accommodating friend's in North Audley Street, where I shall be presently. You understand?

"If you cannot come, then must you send me a note making some appointment for to-morrow. It is absolutely necessary we should meet as early as possible.

"Your affectionate

"Editha."

Such were the contents of the note which Lord Sackville had received in the manner already described, and leaving the prince and Captain Tash to amuse each other, he at once issued forth from the palace. Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, he ordered it to drive to North Audley Street; and on arriving there, he directed the coachman to turn into the little by-street into which the convenient side door of Lady Lechmere's house opened.

Not many minutes was Lord Sackville kept waiting, for the side door was presently opened, and forth came a lady enveloped in the ample cloak and the thick veil belonging to Gertrude. The moment she stepped into the vehicle, Sackville ordered the coachman to drive to Oxford Street, and as the man hastened to obey the instructions thus given, Horace and Editha commenced the hurried conversation which we are about to record.

But we must pause for one single moment to observe that as the hackney-coach rumbled away out of the narrow street, a young man, who had hitherto remained concealed in a doorway a little farther down, and who had been intently watching what was taking place, emerged forth from his concealment and followed in the track of the vehicle.

We now return to the tender pair who are ensconced inside the hackney-coach which the young man was thus pursuing.

"My dear friend," said the countess, throwing up the veil and exchanging fervid kisses with her paramour, "a crisis has now arrived."

"Ah! your husband, the earl?" said Sackville, throwing his arms around her and drawing her close to him as the hackney-coach rumbled along.

"I have received a letter from him to say that he will be home to-morrow evening," continued Editha. "The letter was brought by hand. It was sent through his banker, or lawyer, I suppose —"

"When did you receive it?" asked Lord Sackville, quickly.

"This evening, at about nine o'clock," returned Editha.

"And whence is it dated?"

"From Dover. It says that he has returned home through Belgium, by way of Ostend."

"And he intimates that he shall be home to-morrow night?" asked Sackville, in a voice which showed that some unpleasant misgiving had sprung up in his mind.

"Yes, to-morrow night," responded Editha. "The letter states that he is so ill through seasickness experienced during a rough passage from Ostend to Dover that he is compelled to remain a day at the latter place —"

"Editha," interrupted Lord Sackville, in a tone of alarm, "we are betrayed by some means or another; treachery is intended."

"Ah! now you terrify me," exclaimed the countess, in accents of dismay.

"Did no suspicion strike you when you received that letter?" asked Lord Sackville. "Situated as you are with your husband, and with the great coolness existing between you, it is not probable that he would write you a letter of such a character unless it were meant to throw you off your guard and cover some deep design which he has formed. How often has he written to you during this nearly five months' absence of his upon the Continent?"

"Only twice, and then in the most laconic manner," answered the countess. "Indeed, I showed you his letters. One from Milan, the other from Geneva — "

"And they both stated that you need not write to him in reply, as his movements were so uncertain he could not be assured of remaining long enough at any one place to receive answers from England?"

"And accordingly," rejoined Editha, "I never did write to him during his absence — "

"An absence," added Lord Sackville, "for which he condescended to allege no reason."

"An absence indeed," said Editha, "as unaccountable as the journey itself was suddenly undertaken. But of all that I do not complain, — I have no right to complain, — and you well know why," she added, in a tone of mingled tenderness and melancholy.

"Yes, dearest Editha, I do indeed now feel that matters are approaching a crisis," responded Sackville, also with alarm in his tone. "Depend upon it that at this very moment some danger is hanging over our heads, or we are about to fall into some snare that is set for us. Instead of your husband returning to-morrow night, I will stake my existence that he will be back to-night. Perhaps he has already arrived. Ah! I can see it all. Suspecting you, he thinks that such a letter as he has written will produce the very effect which it has indeed produced, namely, to prompt you to make the most of the few hours that thus seem to be yours previous to his return to-morrow night."

"Yes, yes, I partake all your terrors, I see it all in the same light as yourself," said Editha, who was truly unhappy. "Indeed when that letter came at nine o'clock this evening, delivered by some messenger who immediately departed, I

was filled with misgivings, and Gertrude also shared them. Ah! the faithful and intelligent girl. She besought me not to think of seeing you to-night, but I was bewildered, I was frenzied, I was driven half-mad at the prospect of disgrace, and my agitated feelings got the better of my prudence, so that I sent for you."

"Well, dearest Editha," said Horace, "whatever mischief is done cannot now be recalled."

"And besides," resumed the unhappy lady, with a sort of hysterical quickness, "suppose that our fears are unfounded, that the earl really will not return until to-morrow, and that there is no pitfall dug to entrap us, it is but a postponement for a short space, perhaps only a few hours, for exposure, scandal, and ruin must come at last."

"Yes, you speak but too truly, my poor Editha," said Horace, straining her to his breast and kissing away the tears that were now trickling down her cheeks. "Four months and a half he has been absent — "

"And three months am I advanced in the way to become a mother," murmured Editha, in accents broken by half-stifled sobs. "Oh," she suddenly exclaimed, in a paroxysm of hysterical excitement, "disgrace must inevitably overtake me. It cannot be avoided. It is impossible the earl can be made to believe that he is the father of the child I bear in my bosom, and, as I have already told you, his suspicions were awakened even previous to his departure — "

"Think you that he has ever been absent at all? " asked Sackville, suddenly. "What if the two laconic letters received from Milan and Geneva were posted in those cities by some friend to whom your husband sent them? What if all the while he has been concealed in London, watching the progress of our amour — "

"No, I do not fancy that for a moment," answered Editha. "Besides, even if it were so, our precautions have been so well taken, we might defy all his pryings and peerings; for not even do the very domestics suspect that I have once slept away from the house or once done aught which a lady of virtue might not do. But it is my position that threatens me with exposure."

"Then what is to be done? " asked Lord Sackville, evidently much bewildered and alarmed. "What would you have me do, dearest Editha? "

"I know not — I know not," responded the countess, sobbing in his arms. "Never, never was I so unhappy as I am at this moment. I seem to have lost all courage — all energy, and I feel that the moment is at hand when my name is to be added to that catalogue of family depravity, scandal, and disgrace, in which the names of so many of my nearest relatives already figure."

"Sustain your fortitude, I implore you," said Horace, in his most soothing tones, and accompanying his words with the tenderest caresses.

At this moment the hackney-coach stopped in that part of Oxford Street which is close to Soho Square, and Lady Curzon drew down her veil ere her paramour handed her forth from the vehicle. Then, dismissing the hackney-coach, Horace gave the trembling Editha his arm, and conducted her hastily to the fashionable house of infamy kept by Mrs. Gale in Soho Square.

Two or three times, as they thus passed from Oxford Street to the house alluded to, did Lord Sackville turn his head to ascertain whether any one was following them, but he saw nothing to excite his suspicion that such was the case. And yet that young man who had followed the hackney-coach from the by-street by the side of Lady Lechmere's dwelling had never once lost sight of the vehicle; but, aided by the street lamps, he had kept it in view, and as it did not proceed at a pace calculated to outstrip him, he had no difficulty in thus keeping in its track, till it stopped in Oxford Street. Then, on beholding the gentleman and lady alight, the young man continued to follow them at such a distance as to elude observation when Horace turned his head, as above stated.

Thus was it that the spy kept Lord Sackville and the guilty countess in view, until they entered Mrs. Gale's establishment; and then he posted himself at some little distance, but at a point whence he could maintain a strict watch upon the front door of the house of infamy.

We must now return to North Audley Street.

At the very moment that the hackney-coach, containing Lord Sackville and Editha, rolled away, followed by the young man, the Earl of Curzon himself knocked at the door of Lady Lechmere's house.

" Is her ladyship at home? " he inquired of the domestic who immediately answered the summons.

" Yes, my lord," was the reply.

" And I believe that the Countess of Curzon is with her? " said the earl, assuming an air as if nothing were wrong.

" Yes, my lord," was again the reply. " Her ladyship the countess arrived about a quarter of an hour ago."

" Ah! so I understood in Grosvenor Street," said the earl, alluding to his own mansion. " I have only just returned from the Continent, and learned that the countess had come to pass the evening with Lady Lechmere. Did you happen to hear at what hour the countess ordered the carriage to return for her? "

" At midnight, my lord," answered the livery servant, " But here is my mistress."

At this moment Lady Lechmere, who had heard the double knock at the door, was seen descending the stairs, and a shade suddenly passed over her countenance as she caught sight of the Earl of Curzon. But instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she extended her hand with a graceful smile, saying, " And so your lordship has returned from your Continental trip? But pray walk in," and she conducted him into a parlour opening from the hall.

" Your ladyship is very kind," said the earl, as she desired him to be seated, " but — "

" Oh, if you are in a hurry, I will not attempt to detain you," she exclaimed, with well-affected self-possession, though in her heart she experienced a misgiving. " When did you come home? for I understood that you were not expected until to-morrow evening."

" But it suited me, my lady," said the earl, with a peculiar smile of malignity and in a tone of irony which enchanced Lady Lechmere's uneasiness, — " it suited me to return earlier than I was expected. I believe Editha is with you? "

" Yes, she is come to pass the evening with me," said Lady Lechmere, her looks now again betraying her confusion. " But to tell you the real truth," she added, " your dear countess, whom I love as if she were my own daughter, has been suddenly seized with a slight indisposition. There is no danger, — it will soon pass away, — but she has gone up-stairs to lie down for an hour or so — "

"Indeed!" remarked the earl, with increasing irony of tone. "She must have been seized very suddenly, for it can scarcely be a quarter of an hour since she entered your ladyship's house."

"Yes, it was very sudden," returned the wily and dissolute patrician lady, who, having been an utter profligate during her own youthful years, had now become, on the shady side of existence, a base pander to the profligacies of others. "But you do not look well, Lord Curzon. Will you take some wine? I have the most delicious champagne —"

"I thank your ladyship, but I would rather not," answered the earl, in a cold tone and with a stiff bow. Then, in a peculiar accent and with a look of ominous meaning, he said, "Of course my dear wife is most anxious to see me, and your ladyship can well understand that I am equally desirous to fold her in my embrace. Perhaps you will permit me to see her?"

"But she is fast asleep," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, scarcely able to conceal her fright. "Surely you would not disturb her?"

"There is no necessity to disturb her," said the earl, with a most provoking persistence in his object, so that Lady Lechmere suddenly conceived so bitter a hatred for him, she could almost have assassinated him on the spot, — that is to say, if she had a weapon ready at hand. "There is no necessity to disturb her, I repeat," continued the earl, "I will enter the room on tiptoe."

"But, my lord," said the infamous woman, now trembling visibly, "what would be thought by the servants if they saw me conducting you up-stairs to that part of the house where the bedchambers are situated?"

"What could they think, madam," asked Lord Curzon, with an ironical smile, "except that I was going to the room where my wife was lying indisposed?"

"But the world is so very wicked," rejoined Lady Lechmere, battling hard to dissuade the nobleman from his purpose.

"Your ladyship forces me by this ridiculous argument," said the earl, "to remind you that what might have been probable ten or fifteen years ago is not by any means so likely now," and he gazed with a significant look upon the

lady as he thus reminded her that she was considerably on the shady side of forty.

"Ah! is your lordship so ungallant as to hint that I am getting old?" she exclaimed, affecting a tone of good-tempered remonstrance.

"Let us not diverge from the subject of our discourse," said the earl. "If you be really afraid of scandalous tongues, let one of your maids accompany us to the room where Editha is lying asleep."

"But the doctor has declared that she must not be disturbed," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, thus making a desperate attempt to clinch the matter at once.

"What! is my wife so bad that the doctor has been sent for?" exclaimed Curzon, superciliously.

"It is positively so," responded Lady Lechmere, with a new accession of courage, and therefore meeting the earl's look with a brazen effrontery.

"Well, upon my word," he cried, laughing in bitter mockery, "this is the most curious thing I ever knew in my life. Here have we my Editha, who, before she has been a quarter of an hour under your ladyship's roof on the present occasion, has been seized with illness, conveyed to a couch, visited by the doctor, fallen into a sound sleep— And I suppose that even the doctor himself has gone? Really, I do not believe that so much was ever summed up in so short a space before."

"I do not understand this tone and manner which your lordship thinks fit to assume," said Lady Lechmere, who, finding that cajolery, remonstrance, and effrontery had all been used in vain, now as a last resource adopted an air of indignation. "What interest have I in deceiving your lordship? For what do you take me? And how dare you come with such a demeanour to my house?"

"Ah! since your ladyship puts the matter upon this footing," exclaimed the earl, "it is necessary that I should speak out. Indeed we have been standing here trifling with each other too long. All this fencing with excuses is useless on your part, and therefore let us bandy words no more. Madam," he said, suddenly assuming a stern and resolute look, "I demand instantaneously to see my wife."

"And I declare, my lord," replied Lady Lechmere,

adopting an aspect of defiance, "that you shall not do as you like beneath my roof."

"Then you will force me to create a scandal and an uproar in the house, by pushing my way in spite of opposition to the chamber where, as you allege, my wife is lying down," and as the earl thus spoke, he took up his hat and turned toward the door.

"My lord, you cannot, you would not, you dare not do this," faltered Lady Lechmere, now terribly alarmed.

"I will do it, on my soul, madam, I will do it," exclaimed Curzon. "Now decide — will you conduct me to that chamber? Or shall I find my way thither by myself? And perhaps," he added, with a look of peculiar malignity, "it will not be so difficult as you fancy. Let me see? Up two pair of stairs, then along a carpeted passage, into a bed-chamber where a second door communicates with a back staircase, and in that staircase there is a signal bell, and at the bottom a door opening into the by-street — "

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Lechmere, turning ghastly pale as the Earl of Curzon thus gave utterance to those details which displayed his perfect knowledge of the privacies of her dwelling-house, for the reader will remember that Colonel Malpas had given the earl a full account of all these matters at the hotel at Lausanne.

"Ah! I thought that I should produce some effect upon your ladyship," exclaimed Curzon, enjoying her confusion. "Now will you hesitate to conduct me thither?"

Lady Lechmere rose from her seat, accosted the earl with haggard looks and convulsing form, and placing one of her trembling hands upon his arm, said, in a low, thick voice, "Tell me how you know all this — tell me who has been the betrayer."

"Well, I do not know why I should keep the secret," said the earl, "and indeed I may answer your question if it be only to prove how entirely everything is known to me. Learn, then, that from the lips of one of my wife's paramours — Colonel Malpas."

"The villain! I always knew he would betray her," ejaculated Lady Lechmere. "You are aware, then," she continued, her voice again becoming thick and hesitating, "that your wife — "

"Is not beneath your roof at this moment," exclaimed the

earl, " but that Gertrude is here in her stead, and that when the carriage comes at midnight, then Gertrude, dressed as her mistress and closely veiled, will enter the vehicle and be driven home to Grosvenor Street. Such," added the earl, with bitter irony, " are the precautions adopted to prevent my lackeys, coachman, and grooms from even suspecting the freaks and pranks of her profligate mistress. I must say that if every lady of fashion and rank were equally cunning in devising measures to lull suspicion asleep and defy detection, the public would miss many and many a rich treat of crim. con. which the public journals serve up in so enticing a manner."

" Now, my dear lord, be reasonable, expose not your wife," urged Lady Lechmere. " Only reflect — "

" Ay, but I wish in the first instance," said the earl, with a look of deep meaning, " to take my revenge on that minx Gertrude, who has so long and so successfully pandered to Editha's depravities."

" And the revenge which you propose to take? " said Lady Lechmere, inquiringly.

" Oh, it is my intention to fall into the spirit of the frolic," said the earl, with a forced laugh, " and treat her exactly as if I believed her really to be my wife. No matter if the room be blazing with lights, I shall affect to be so blind as to judge by the apparel and not by the features. For that Editha and Gertrude have changed dresses up in that room, I have no doubt. Now, madam," added the earl, suddenly throwing off his air of bantering irony and assuming a peremptory tone and manner, " I enjoin you, without another word of remonstrance, to accompany me to that chamber, which, if you refuse, I can so well find for myself."

Lady Lechmere, seeing that there was no alternative, and hoping that the earl meant to limit his proceedings to the pleasant vengeance which he proposed to wreak upon Gertrude, led the way from the parlour. Having conducted his lordship up the two flight of stairs, she led him along the carpeted passage; but when within a few yards of the door at the end, she paused, and said, in a low whisper, " Shall I go in advance to prepare the girl for your appearance? "

" Not at all, my lady, it is not necessary," at once answered the earl. " I presume the door is unlocked? "

"Yes," replied Lady Lechmere. "But I thought you wished me to accompany you?"

"Not farther than this point," immediately rejoined the earl, and opening a door which fronted the spot where they had thus halted, he said, in a quick, peremptory whisper, "Your ladyship will please to walk in here, for I see that the room is unoccupied."

"But what on earth do you mean?" asked Lady Lechmere, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean simply that I am going to lock your ladyship in here for an hour, while I talk to Gertrude in the other room. Because," continued the earl, "to tell you the truth, I do not choose you to have the opportunity of sending off a message to warn my delectable wife at Mrs. Gale's of my presence and proceedings here this night. She fancies, no doubt, that I shall not return until to-morrow, and in that belief let her remain."

"But, my lord, you cannot think of imprisoning me here for an entire hour?" said Lady Lechmere, in a low voice so as to avoid being overheard.

"No harm can arise," rejoined the earl, who seemed to have an answer ready for every remonstrance. "It is only eleven o'clock, and the countess ordered the carriage for twelve. This interval of an hour you would have passed in yonder room with Gertrude, if I had not come to interrupt your proceedings; therefore you will not be missed by the domestics."

Again did Lady Lechmere see that the Earl of Curzon was resolute in carrying his purposes into execution, and dreading an exposure which would cover her with disgrace and infamy by revealing herein the true light of a patrician demirep and procuress, she resigned herself to the hour's captivity in the bedroom, the door of which Curzon now locked upon her. Then putting the key into his pocket, the earl hastened on to the end of the passage, and opening the door, he entered the room where Gertrude, dressed in the costume of the countess, was reclining negligently upon a sofa.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EARL'S VENGEANCE

It was the custom of Lady Lechmere, whenever these manœuvrings were going on with respect to Editha and Gertrude, to remain in the room which thus so conveniently served the purpose of the intrigue, and this she did not only to sustain the idea amongst her dependents that she was thus closeted for hours together with her bosom friend the Countess of Curzon, but likewise to guard against any intrusion into this chamber. Gertrude, therefore, always felt completely at her ease and was lulled into perfect security whe ever she was thus performing the part of her mistress at Lady Lechmere's house.

On the present occasion the handsome young lady's-maid, dressed in a velvet robe belonging to her mistress, was reclining negligently upon the sofa as the Earl of Curzon entered the room. As he opened the door quietly and without violence, Gertrude thought it was Lady Lechmere coming back, and she did not immediately turn her head. But as the earl stood still to survey the half-recumbent form of the good-looking Gertrude, she wondered that Lady Lechmere (as she fancied it to be) should have stopped short; and suddenly looking around, she gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay as she recognized her master.

"Ah! my dear Editha," said the earl, affecting to believe that it was his wife; and as he at once advanced toward the sofa, he purposely overturned a little work-table on which stood the two wax lights. Then, as the candles were thus suddenly extinguished and utter darkness prevailed all in a moment, he placed himself on the sofa and took Gertrude in his arms, saying, "I beg you ten thousand pardons, my dear Editha, for my awkwardness in thus upsetting the

table and putting out the lights. We can, however, converse just as comfortably in the dark. But why do you tremble? " and he covered the cheeks and lips of the lady's-maid with kisses.

For the moment Gertrude was completely bewildered. Could it be possible that the earl had failed, in the rapid glance he threw upon her, to observe that it was not his wife, but her maid; and was it purely through accident that he had upset the table? Such were the questions which Gertrude rapidly asked herself. But how could she answer them? Indeed she knew not what to think.

" My dear Editha," continued the nobleman, indulging in certain little amorous licenses and tender dalliances which Gertrude dared not resist, " it strikes me that you are cruel and unkind after my long absence from you. What! not a word — not a kiss. Come, if you will not speak, at all events press your lips to mine."

And as he thus spoke he strained Gertrude to his breast in such a manner that, as their lips met, the abigail could not withdraw herself from the warm and exciting contact even if she were inclined.

" There! now I know by these kisses," continued the earl, after several long and fervid caresses which he bestowed, and which Gertrude gave back again, — " now I know that you are not indifferent to my return. It is, however, an unexpected pleasure that I should find you thus amiable as to receive my caresses with so much fervour and give them back with kindred warmth. Let us say nothing of the past. I will not inquire what you have been doing during my absence, and you must not seek to know of me what I have been doing on the Continent. Therefore let no disagreeable thoughts mar our present enjoyment."

And still, as he spoke, he held Gertrude in his embrace, bestowing upon her such caresses as gave unmistakable proof of his ultimate intentions. Gertrude, although so thoroughly experienced in the ways of the world, — so full of duplicity, and with such a genius for intrigue, — had, nevertheless, retained her chastity; but her passions were strong, and they were now gradually being excited by this contact, in the dark, with a man, who, though she liked him not, possessed a handsome exterior. Moreover, on a former occasion, we have seen Gertrude willing to abandon

herself to the earl in order to save her mistress, and she was not the less inclined to do so on the present occasion. But still she asked herself, was it possible that the earl really believed her to be his wife? Or was all that he was now saying but a portion of some deeply settled scheme of revenge?

"Now you will believe that I have grown quite uxorious, my dear Editha," he continued, "and you may think, perhaps, that I seem rather like a lover than a husband. Well, be it so. You are beautiful, your temperament is warm and voluptuous, you have every qualification to fit you for the pleasures of love. Wonder not, therefore, if I thus rejoice at the opportunity which enables me to revel in your arms immediately on my return."

And now, as his own passions were worked up to an irresistible degree, the kisses which he bestowed upon Gertrude became more ardent, more fervid, so that his companion was inspired with the same volcano-like passion which now animated himself.

But we need dwell no longer upon this scene; suffice it to say, that the Earl of Curzon continued to affect the belief that he was really with his wife instead of Gertrude, and that the young woman, excited in her passions and bewildered in her ideas, surrendered up her person to her master.

It was now close upon midnight, and Lord Curzon, gently disengaging himself from the embrace in which Gertrude held him, for it was she who had become amorous and tender now, said, "I believe you ordered the carriage at twelve? Come, put on your cloak and let us depart."

Gertrude, now more than ever wondering whether Lord Curzon really fancied that she was his wife, or whether he was still playing a studied part, felt about the room for the cloak which her mistress had left there for her use, and having put it on, she drew the hood far down over her countenance, as was her wont on these occasions."

"Now, dearest Editha," said the earl, still speaking in the kindest possible tone, "give me your arm."

Gertrude did so, not knowing what on earth was to be the end of the present adventure, for her heart was beating with the lingering sense of passion's rapture, and also with vague misgivings of what might yet be coming. The earl threw open the door of the room, and they emerged forth

from the darkness into the passage which was well lighted; and now from within the depths of her hood did Gertrude fling a quick, searching, and anxious glance upon the earl.

"Dearest Editha, how happy do I feel with you to-night!" he said, in a tone of such well-assumed tenderness and sincerity that Gertrude was still more confused and bewildered than ever, for though he met the quick and sidelong glance which she threw up at him, he did not appear to notice that it was not the countenance of his wife.

"What can it mean?" asked Gertrude within herself. "Does he actually take me for his Editha? Or is it all a horrible mockery which must presently end in some suddenly outbreaking storm? His conduct is not natural; no, it is not natural. He must have known that it was not his wife whom he ere now clasped in his arms."

The girl's musings were suddenly cut short by an observation which Lord Curzon now made.

"By the bye," he exclaimed, "that dear, amiable, kind-hearted Lady Lechmere, who has been the means of procuring me this pleasant *tête-à-tête* with my own dear wife, said that she would wait in this room."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon stopped suddenly at a door in the passage, and unlocking it so quickly that Gertrude, whose head was muffled in the hood of the cloak, could scarcely tell whether it had been thus fastened or not, he threw open the door.

"Now, my dear Lady Lechmere," he immediately said, as the patrician procuress hastily came forth, "we are going to take our departure. I can assure you that my sweet Editha and myself have passed an hour of unfeigned enjoyment. Strange as such a *tête-à-tête* between husband and wife may seem at the house of a friend instead of beneath their own roof, it nevertheless has its advantages; for I can assure you, my dear Lady Lechmere, that on the present occasion Editha and I have so completely made up all past differences that we are better friends than on the day we were married. This temporary absence of mine has been beneficial in making us each reflect upon our little faults and failings toward one another, and, henceforth, we mean to prove an example to society, — a true pattern couple."

Thus speaking, in a hurried manner, but with a cheerful air, Lord Curzon, who had given an arm to Lady Lechmere,

conducted the two females along the passage, — Gertrude on his right, Lady Lechmere on his left; and all the time he kept his looks so divided, as it were, between them both, that they could find no opportunity of exchanging significant glances. Thus Lady Lechmere, who understood full well all the horrible bantering which ran through the earl's observations, was not able either to breathe a syllable, or throw a look that might prepere Gertrude for the winding up of this strange drama. On her part, the young woman was still a prey to an uncertainty that every instant grew more painful; but, as the earl still continued to treat her as if she were really the countess, she, of course, sustained the part by keeping the hood drawn over her countenance.

The earl continued to talk in the same strain as before, while he conducted his two female companions down the staircase, and, as he came within the hearing of the footman who was in the hall, he said, with all the appearance of the most genuine sincerity, " I am sure, my dear Lady Lechmere, the countess must feel deeply grateful for the kind interest which you experience in her. I am sure that these evenings which she passes at your house are the happiest in her life. But, my dear Editha," he suddenly exclaimed, turning toward Gertrude, " how you muffle yourself up! Here, at the end of April, too, — when it is quite warm, — I am sure it must be very unwholesome. At all events, throw back the hood."

And suiting the action to the word, the earl raised his hand so quickly, and drew back the hood so abruptly, that Gertrude had not even time to anticipate the proceeding, and thus, all in a moment, was the countenance of the lady's-maid revealed to the astonished footman who stood holding the front door open.

" Heavens! " ejaculated the Earl of Curzon, now affecting to be struck with dismay. " What does this mean? "

Gertrude, deadly pale, stood transfixed to the spot, while Lady Lechmere gave utterance to a groan of anguish, and sank down senseless at the foot of the stairs.

" What means all this, I demand? " exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, pretending to be almost frantic. " Look — behold — here is my wife's maid, decked out in her mistress's apparel, even to the very cloak with the hood. Ah! what a convenient hood! "

Lady Lechmere's footman, who stood at the hall door, gazed with stupid astonishment upon this scene; for he, of ocurse, had never supposed but that it was always the countess herself whom the carriage had been wont to fetch, and who was accustomed to trip forth so well muffled up in that cloak and hood. The lackey, who was in attendance upon the carriage which had just arrived, hearing the strange exclamations to which his master was giving vent, peeped into the hall, and became a witness of the scene. To the coachman, who was seated on the box, did he hurriedly communicate what he thus beheld, and that functionary, leaping down, also looked into the hall to gratify his curiosity.

Indescribable was the scene of confusion which now followed. Gertrude, after standing for nearly a minute, gazing in speechless horror upon the earl, fell into strong hysterics; for she now understood and experienced a full sense of the terrible revenge which her master was bent upon this night executing, and the first fury of which had overtaken Lady Lechmere and herself.

Leaving the servants to pay such attention as they chose to the mistress of the house, who had fainted, and to Gertrude, who was screaming in a fit, the Earl of Curzon sped forth from the hall.

"You see that your mistress is not here," he said, in a tone of well-affected bitterness, as he encountered his coachman and lackey on the door-steps. "But did you both mark well that it was the vile Gertrude who has adopted this stratagem to shield her still viler lady?" Then, without waiting for a reply, the nobleman jumped into the carriage, saying, "Perhaps we shall find the countess somewhere else. Drive to Soho Square."

The carriage door was banged, the coachman clambered on his box, the lackey sprang up behind, and away rolled the equipage. We need hardly say that the two domestics were astounded at what had just taken place. Although they had often thought it odd that when they went to fetch the countess, at Lady Lechmere's house, she should on every occasion, without a single exception, be so closely hooded or so carefully veiled, yet never had they entertained the slightest suspicion that it was not the countess whom the carriage on those occasions conveyed home. Now, how-

ever, that the explosion had taken place, they recollected many little circumstances which they wondered had not opened their eyes before as to the stratagem so artfully carried on by their mistress and her maid. On this point, however, we need not dwell; suffice it to say, that the coachman and the lackey were highly delighted at the prospect of so fine a piece of scandal and so glorious an action for crim. con. against some one or another, which they now saw to be the inevitable results of this night's adventure.

By half-past twelve Soho Square was reached, and the earl ordered the carriage to stop at a little distance from Mrs. Gale's. The moment the coachman reined in his horses, that same young man who had hitherto been keeping watch in the vicinage hastened up to the carriage, and, approaching the window, said in a hurried tone of inquiry, " The earl? "

" Yes," replied that nobleman. " What news, Theodore? "

" They are here," said Varian, glancing around toward Mrs. Gale's house, over the front door of which a lamp was burning.

" The countess and Emmerson? " said the earl, quickly.

" I have no doubt of it," was Varian's response.

" But your answer," exclaimed Curzon, " seems to imply a doubt. Are you not certain — "

" I posted myself where your lordship told me, in the by-street," Theodore hastened to explain, " and I saw a female, closely veiled and cloaked, come forth from Lady Lechmere's side door. All took place as your lordship had led me to suppose. A hackney-coach was waiting, into which she entered, and it drove away. I followed it to Oxford Street, I saw a gentleman and lady alight, I pursued them at a distance, and lost not sight of them till they entered Mrs. Gale's door. Here I have since remained, and they have not come out again."

" Good! they are caught in a net," ejaculated the earl. " But why did you at first speak in a doubting manner as to the identity of the parties? "

" I am not aware that I did, my lord," replied Theodore Varian, " unless it were, perhaps, because you so positively asked me whether I was sure it was the countess and Emmerson. Now, I could not be positive, because the lady appeared closely veiled as she came forth from Lady Lechmere's house, and after she and her companion alighted in Oxford

Street, I dared not approach them too closely, for fear they might see that they were followed, and this would have spoilt all."

"But you are certain that the man was Emmerson?" said the earl.

"No, my lord, I cannot possibly be certain of it," answered Varian. "I did not approach close enough to see."

"But, at all events," persisted Lord Curzon, "you are confident that you never lost sight of the hackney-coach from the time it left Lady Lechmere's until it stopped in Oxford Street?"

"I am confident on that head," replied Varian.

"Then I am equally confident," said the earl, "that the lady who issued forth from Lady Lechmere's was the countess. That her companion is Emmerson is most probable, unless, indeed," he murmured to himself, "she has got hold of another paramour, which, by the bye, is not unlikely. But no matter who he is."

Thus musing within himself, the earl alighted from the carriage, and bidding the coachman wait, he and Varian stepped up to Mrs. Gale's front door. The knock which they gave was immediately answered by a female servant, for no one who applied for admission during the night at that house was ever kept waiting. The moment they passed into the hall, the servant, to whom Lord Curzon was well known, looked somewhat terrified on recognizing him, for the woman instantaneously suspected that an explosion was about to take place in respect to the countess.

"My wife is up-stairs," said the earl, slipping a handful of guineas into the servant's hand. "Come, I know your discretion and prudence, as well as your trustworthiness, but it is no use denying the fact. My wife is up-stairs, I say."

"For Heaven's sake, don't make a noise, my lord," interrupted the servant-woman, in an imploring tone. "Besides, your lordship should remember that if you have been here now and then with a lady, surely your wife has an equal right to come here now and then with a gentleman?"

"Silence!" said the earl, sternly, "and now show me and my friend the way up to the room where my wife and her companion are. Not another word! Obey me, or I shall commence the search myself."

The idea that his lordship would go peeping into every room throughout the spacious establishment at once gave wings to the woman's feet, inasmuch as not for worlds would she have had the mysteries of the various apartments — or at least of two or three of them — violated by an intruder's gaze. For in one was a pious lady " whose praise was in all the churches," now sleeping in the arms of a private in the Horse-guards; in another was a bishop, renowned for his piety, who had brought thither a young girl of about fourteen or fifteen, whom he was initiating in the ways of wickedness; in a third apartment there was a judge, the sternest upon the bench, now in company with one of the most noted prostitutes about town; and in a fourth there was a young lady of high birth, great beauty, and extraordinary accomplishments, clasped in the arms of her foreign music-master.

No wonder, therefore, was it if the discreet servant of Mrs. Gale's establishment felt anxious to prevent the veil being drawn aside from these mysteries; and accordingly, without any further remonstrance or hesitation, did she lead the way up-stairs, followed by the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian.

" This is the door," she said, in a low whisper, as she paused at a particular chamber.

The Earl of Curzon's eyes now glowed with triumph, for he felt that the moment was come when he should be avenged upon Editha for all her former faithlessness toward him and all the treacheries which she had put in practice. Trying the handle of the door and finding that it was locked inside, as indeed he had of course anticipated, the earl unhesitatingly threw himself with all his force against it and burst it open. A scream of terror and an ejaculation of rage burst simultaneously from male and female lips within the room into which Lord Curzon immediately precipitated himself. Lights were burning upon the table, and by the aid thereof the countess and her paramour were at once discovered sitting up, in a startled manner, in the couch.

But that paramour, who was he? Not Emmerson the bill-broker, as the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian had alike hoped and expected, but the husband of the brilliant Venetia, the handsome and accomplished Lord Sackville!

"Create no disturbance in the house," said Horace, instantaneously precipitating himself from the bed, and speaking in a hurried manner to the Earl of Curzon. "To-morrow I shall be prepared to give you such satisfaction as you may demand."

Editha, covering her face with her hands, burst forth into a violent fit of sobbing, and Theodore Varian, so soon as he perceived that her ladyship's companion was not Emmerson, over whose exposure he had hoped to exult, withdrew upon the landing outside, through motives of delicacy.

The Earl of Curzon did not immediately reply to Sackville's remarks, but stood gazing upon him with a sort of stupid dismay for nearly a minute. It was not, however, that Curzon was so very much astonished at discovering who his wife's paramour for the occasion thus was, but it was because it instantaneously struck him that this was a visitation of retributive justice. For had not the Earl of Curzon intrigued with Sackville's wife, and how could the earl himself now complain of Sackville's intrigue with Editha? Such was the thought that struck him suddenly as if with a sense of dismay, and held him speechless. But Sackville, so far from suspecting what was thus passing in Curzon's mind at the moment, attributed the consternation of his looks to quite another source.

"Considering all the friendship that has subsisted between us, Lord Curzon," he said, in a tone of self-mortification and repentance, "you doubtless regard me as the perpetrator of an unparalleled atrocity?"

"Yes, my lord," responded the earl, instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, "in such a light do I indeed regard your conduct. But of course you shall hear from me so soon as satisfactory arrangements can be made." Then, turning toward Editha, he exclaimed, in a tone of malignant triumph, "At length I have detected your ladyship. Everything is known to me. Gertrude has ere now been unmasked in the presence of Lady Lechmere's servants and of mine —"

"Ah! then the scandal and the exposure are complete?" exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, in a voice broken with convulsive sobs; but the next instant, as if suddenly animated with a lightning flash, she sprang from the couch, and

in that state of seminudity she extended her bare and exquisitely rounded arm, crying, "'Tis well, my lord! you have done your worst for the moment; you triumph doubtless. But whom is it that you thus crush? A poor weak woman, who loved you at first and who would have remained faithful to you ever, had not your neglect chagrined her and your infidelities alienated her affection from you. Can you wonder that I have gone wrong? Heaven is my witness that, with your example before my eyes, it would have been impossible for me to go right. But though you triumph now for the moment, yet may the tables be turned against you. In one respect, however, you will have your wish. You will get rid of a wife whom your constant profligacies render it inconvenient for you to keep, and whom your extravagancies make it impossible for you to maintain. From hence I depart at once, yes, and away from London I speed, perhaps from England altogether. One thing I implore you," she added, her voice suddenly becoming full of agitation and her looks replete with plaintive emotions, as she turned her eyes from her husband to her lover, and then back again on her husband, "and this is, that you will not endanger your lives for one so little worth that proceeding as I?"

"Madam," said the Earl of Curzon, who had listened with impatience to this speech, "of that matter I am the best judge."

Thus speaking, he turned abruptly away and haughtily quitted the room; but recollecting something, he again turned back and said, "The carriage which called for your ladyship at Lady Lechmere's now waits below and is at your service."

"Ah! even this crowning degradation has he put upon me, — to expose me to the very lackeys of our household!" exclaimed the countess, in a tone of rending bitterness, a tone in which the accents of grief penetrated no longer, but were displaced by those of vindictive hate and rage, for she felt that to have brought the carriage to that house of infamy whither he had traced her was an insult of so cowardly and atrocious a character that, bad though she might be, it exceeded all the bounds of legitimate chastisement.

Lord Curzon gave a scornful laugh in response to her

ejaculation of fury, and once more turning on his heel, he quitted the room.

On the landing he found Theodore Varian waiting for him, and they issued from the house together. On thus emerging forth, the earl coolly and deliberately said to the footman in attendance upon the carriage, "Your mistress is with a paramour at Mrs. Gale's house of fashionable accommodation. Go boldly, knock loudly at the door, and send up word by the servant that the carriage is waiting for her ladyship."

Then, having given this last instruction for the purpose of inflicting another torture upon his wretched wife, the Earl of Curzon hurried away on foot, accompanied by Theodore Varian.

"And now, my lord," said the young man, "what can be done in reference to Emmerson? For your lordship is pledged to me in the most solemn manner to do all you can to ruin that villain. Remember, your lordship owes me a debt of gratitude, for through me did you obtain possession of those five thousand guineas."

"I have not forgotten the obligation I owe you," said the earl, "and I shall cheerfully, indeed, most gladly, bring an action for crim. con. against Emmerson as well as against Lord Sackville. Do you not remember that some months ago you assured me that in Emmerson's writing-desk, to which you said you possessed a skeleton key, you discovered a letter from the countess?"

"Yes, my lord I remember it well," replied Varian. "It is not likely that I should have forgotten it. It contains damning proofs of her ladyship's guilt."

"But you said at the time," remarked the earl, "that you could not procure it, for fear of exciting Emmerson's suspicions."

"Oh, but that reason exists no longer, my lord," exclaimed Varian, in a tone of savage exultation. "I care not now how soon I leave that vile, bad man again. During the past four or five months I have been able to do enough to lay the foundation of a vengeance so striking, so terrible — But no matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself, "your lordship requires that letter of which we have been speaking, and to-morrow or next day you shall have it without fail."

The earl and Theodore then separated, the former to

return to his mansion in Grosvenor Street, and there gloat over the ruin of Editha; the other to retrace his way to the humble but neat dwelling where he and Ariadne dwelt, and where he retired to rest in fiendish joy at the approaching downfall of Mr. Emmerson.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CAPTAIN ENJOYING HIMSELF

We must now return to Carlton House, where, as the reader will remember, we left the prince locked in a room with Mrs. Malpas, the colonel with Venetia in her boudoir, and Captain Tash lying concealed in the housemaid's chamber.

Having ignominiously expelled therefrom the colonel in his female attire, Captain Tash waited for about a quarter of an hour, when he fancied that Malpas must have got clear out of the palace, and finding that all was now still in the passage, and little suspecting indeed to what desirable quarters Malpas had managed to introduce himself, the captain issued forth from the housemaid's bedchamber. Returning to the dining-room and finding that Sackville had not come back, — remembering, too, that he had intimated he should not return until a very late hour, — the redoubtable Tash resolved upon sitting up for him. But perceiving that the decanters were well-nigh emptied, he rang the bell violently.

"Plumpstead, my worthy fellow," said the captain to the butler, who himself answered the summons under the impression that more wine was wanted, "you behold me alone, without liquor and without a companion. Now, forasmuch as you are an excellent fellow and have the keeping of an excellent cellar, you shall forthwith bring up half a dozen bottles of the raciest vintage. You can then trot off to bed, as I will sit up for Lord Sackville. But stop one moment. Is my man Robin in your servants' hall?"

"He is, sir," was the reply.

"What is he doing?" asked Tash.

"He has worked himself into the darkest corner of the

place," responded Plumpstead, "and there he sits just for all the world as if he was afraid he was going to be eaten up."

"Ah! you see how modest and diffident he is," exclaimed the captain. "That's the way I've disciplined him. You can tell him I want to speak to him."

The butler departed to execute these commissions, and in a few minutes he returned, bringing half a dozen of wine and followed by Robin.

"Set down the bottles," said Tash, "and I will decant them as I want them." Then, as soon as Plumpstead had withdrawn, he exclaimed, "Now, Robin, sit down and make yourself comfortable. You see how nicely I have managed to get the run of the place, and here I am, the bosom friend of Lord Sackville, the confidant of the prince regent, and smiled upon even by the beautiful Venetia, who does not forget the service we rendered her some time ago. Come, sit down, Robin, I say, and help me knock off this half-dozen of wine, for I mean to wait till Lord Sackville comes back."

Robin accordingly sat down with his master, who began a complete carouse, to which his former potations while sitting with the prince were mere drops of water compared to Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Robin to some little extent threw off his timidity and reserve, and kept his master company. Thus two or three hours passed away, until at length Captain Tash's watch — for he sported one now, and a very handsome one it was, too — informed him that it was close upon three o'clock in the morning. He now ordered Robin to be off home and get to bed, and the Man Friday accordingly took his departure from Carlton House. Captain Tash then opened the last bottle of the six, which he had kept as a special relish for himself, and he was just imbibing the first tumbler — ordinary glasses he affected not — when the door opened and Lord Sackville made his appearance.

"Here I am, my lord, you see," said Tash, in a voice that was somewhat thick and husky, and also interrupted by the hiccoughs, for though the captain was as well-seasoned a human cask as any in London, yet on the present occasion he certainly had imbibed a leetle too much.

"Ah! Tash, are you here still?" said Horace, who looked

pale, care-worn, and agitated, an appearance that was enhanced by the disordered state of his hair and apparel, for, as the reader may very well suppose, he had not tarried to make a very careful toilet at Mrs. Gale's. "Well, I am glad that you are here. Perhaps I shall want your services to-morrow or next day. But have you not been drinking a little?" he demanded, as he now observed the captain's flushed countenance and heavy-looking eyes.

"No, not much," was the response. "About a dozen tumblers of curaçao punch before the prince retired, and just those six bottles subsequently."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Horace, astonished at the quantity. "But no matter, I am glad you remained and felt yourself at home."

"But what ails your lordship?" demanded Tash, who now, in spite of a little opaqueness of vision and obfuscation of ideas, could not help observing that there was something strange in Sackville's looks.

"I will tell you to-morrow," said Horace, fancying that the captain was too drunk to converse upon so delicate a matter at the present moment.

"Nonsense, man!" exclaimed Tash, "tell me all about it now. If anybody has annoyed you, let me know who it is, and I will go and cut his throat from ear to ear; and if you have got into trouble about a woman, egad! we will make Robin marry her, and patch up her reputation."

"Cease this jesting," said Horace, impatiently, "for if you purpose to act as my friend, you must exhibit due prudence and caution."

"Find a more prudent man than I am in all Europe, except perhaps here and there one," said Captain Tash, "and I'll consent to let him eat me up at a mouthful. Now then, propound your grievance. What is it? There's a woman in the case, I feel convinced."

"A lady of high rank and of great beauty," said Horace, "whose name, too, is well known in the fashionable world. This lady has been detected with me by her own husband."

"Daggers and blades!" said Tash, in the husky voice of semi-ebriety, "this is prettily romantic but infernally disagreeable. Who is the lady? For I suppose all London will ring with it to-morrow."

"Yes," responded Horace, "the report will circulate like wildfire. 'Tis the Countess of Curzon."

"By Jupiter! I should not have thought it," exclaimed Tash. "From what I heard, I fancied she was virtue itself."

"Never mind what you heard," said Horace, "here is a positive fact for you. The earl has ere now discovered his wife and me together at Mrs. Gale's."

"And a very respectable place, too," observed Tash. "I once broke a bishop's head there for getting possession of a girl of mine, and knocked a doctor of divinity's eye out on another occasion because he wouldn't stand a second dozen of wine. But what has become of the countess?"

"She has gone to one of her sisters for the rest of this night," answered Horace, "and to-morrow morning she means to leave London."

"But when did this take place?"

"Soon after twelve o'clock," replied Horace. "But the time has slipped away while I have been escorting the unhappy lady to her sister's, and then hurrying off to Lady Lechmere's to ascertain what had happened there and fetch her maid Gertrude — "

"Your lordship seems to be talking as if you thought I knew all about it," interrupted Tash.

"Ah, true!" exclaimed Horace. "But I cannot enter into details now, I am too excited."

"Lie down and go to sleep," said the captain, "and you will wake up quite refreshed and comfortable, ready to eat a good breakfast and then go out and fight a duel with Lord Curzon. For of course you want me to be your second, and of all offices in the world there is none that I fulfil so well as that. By all the daggers and cannons! I will stick to you to the very last; and you shall never leave the ground till you have either killed your adversary or been killed yourself."

"Do not prate in this manner, Tash," said Horace, impatiently. "But pardon my excitement. I am fearfully agitated, — not that I dread the duel, which is doubtless inevitable, but because it will create such a scandal — "

"Scandal, egad!" vociferated the captain, "I wish to heavens that I was about to be the object of such scandal. Why, courted as you are now by all the fashionable world, it is nothing to the way in which you will be sought after,

caressed, and lionized when once this affair is well blown. Upon my soul, you will become the envy of every man about town. When you go into society you will soon see that 'tis much better to have the reputation of a good crim. con. than to carry about with you the sanctity of a bishop. Ah! what a triumph is in store for you! The moment you enter a ballroom, you will have all the old dowagers tapping you with their fans, and saying, 'Ah! the naughty man!' while they lick their old lips and wish to Heaven that their young and beautiful days had not passed. Then good-looking mammas of between thirty and forty will pretend to be horrified, and holding up their hands, will exclaim, 'Don't come near me, Lord Sackville. It is really quite shocking of you,' and at the same time they will look up with such ardent longing into your face that it will be your own fault if you don't revel in the conquest of all the finest women in London. But the young ladies, the unmarried ones, the misses — ah! that will be quite charming. What wicked looks will be thrown upon you! What sly glances flung sidelong from eyes flashing with the nascent fires that the very idea of your doings will excite in the virginal bosom! In fact, it will be a perfect triumph for your lordship, and it makes me quite sentimental and romantic when I think of it. But, by the bye, what will her ladyship say?" and Captain Tash jerked his finger up to a splendid portrait of Venetia which hung in the apartment.

"Oh, I am not afraid of curtain-lectures," exclaimed Horace, scarcely weighing what he said. "I feel more for Lady Curzon, on whose head such dishonour has fallen."

"Well, my lord, go up to bed, I tell you," said Tash, "and cool your brain with a few hours' sleep. I will lie down on the sofa in this room, so that I shall be ready in the morning to act for you at once should a hostile message come."

Lord Sackville followed the captain's advice and sought his own bedchamber, where, fatigued alike in mind and body, he fell into a profound slumber. The gallant officer, having finished the last bottle and just taken what he called "a thimbleful" (half a tumbler) of brandy to sink it all, rolled himself off his chair upon the sofa, and there speedily became entranced in sleep.

When the captain awoke, it was broad daylight, and

looking at his watch he found it was eight o'clock. Stealing forth from the dining-room, he hastened along the passage and unlocked the door of the chamber in which the prince and Mrs. Malpas had passed the night together. He then retraced his way to the dining-room, rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered the summons to show him to a chamber where he might perform his ablutions. This was done, and when the captain had shaved, washed himself, and had his clothes brushed, he declared that "he was ready to eat breakfast against any two men living."

A few explanations will now suffice to give the issue of the other adventures which occurred at Carlton House during the memorable night whereof we have been writing.

In the first place, we must state that Mrs. Malpas succeeded in escaping unobserved out of the palace, but not without a previous understanding between herself and his Royal Highness as to some future meeting. The prince gained his own dressing-room, likewise free from unpleasant notice, and by no means dissatisfied with the new conquest which he had achieved.

Let us now peep into Venetia's boudoir. There, at about eight o'clock in the morning, we shall find the lady herself still reclining in the couch where she had been compelled to abandon her charms to a man whom she detested. The colonel was up and dressed, — that is to say, so far as he could be, his coat and waistcoat having been left in the housemaid's room. But Jessica was summoned, and when the faithful abigail was admitted into the boudoir and found how her mistress had, after all, been triumphed over by the colonel, she could scarcely conceal her indignation. A significant look, however, from her mistress induced her to hold her peace, by reminding her that she, the brilliant Venetia, was completely in the colonel's power, but that the day of vengeance would sooner or later come. As for Malpas himself, he sought not even to conceal his sense of triumph and satisfaction, but this feeling was only expressed in his looks, and not in his words.

To be brief, Jessica procured his coat and waistcoat from the chamber of the housemaid, to whom she proffered some hurried excuse to account for those garments being there

at all, and in all haste did she return with her burden to the boudoir. Thence she conducted the colonel to the private issue from the palace, and as she parted from him, she said, in a low but impressive whisper, "Remember, sir, that great though your triumph has been this night, 'tis not one of which an honourable man may boast."

"Her ladyship," responded Malpas, significantly, "not satisfied with having sealed my lips with her kisses, has undertaken to fasten them still more hermetically with her gold. Indeed, we have a thorough, complete, and amicable understanding together."

Thus speaking, he took his departure, and Jessica, giving vent to her disgust with a haughty toss of the head, hastened back to Venetia's boudoir. There she learned from her ladyship's lips the history of the misadventure which had made the colonel her companion for the past night, instead of the partner of his own wife's couch in the spare bedroom. But though Venetia could explain how the colonel came with her, yet neither she nor the abigail could account for the extraordinary conduct which Mrs. Malpas had adopted in refusing him admission.

Having risen from her couch and performed her toilet, Venetia was about to sally forth to the Marquis of Leveson, in order to obtain from him a further sum of five thousand guineas, wherewith to purchase secrecy of the extortioner Malpas, when she received the following letter enclosing the bank-notes she had entrusted to Mrs. Malpas:

"Nine o'clock, A. M.

"Immediately upon issuing from Carlton House, I enter a shop in Pall Mall for the purpose of penning these few lines to your ladyship, not only that I may at once and without a moment's unnecessary delay enclose the large sum which your ladyship placed in my hand for a special purpose, but also to beseech your ladyship not to charge me with ingratitude for the part that I acted last night. Were I to inform your ladyship that when the instant arrived for me to receive my husband I changed my mind, you would not believe me, because your servant Jessica has no doubt informed you that the key disappeared from the place where you concealed it, and therefore the fact of my being enabled to leave the chamber ere now must of course prove

to you that the key had by some means found its way into the chamber. Your ladyship will hence conclude that something transpired of a totally unexpected nature to interfere with our previous plans and compel me to refuse admittance to my husband when Jessica brought him to the door. Yes, Lady Sackville, something did transpire, but you will pardon me if I pass it over in silence. It is my secret, and must remain so. Doubtless I have forfeited your ladyship's friendship and good opinion. It is my misfortune, scarcely my fault. At all events, I beseech you not to attribute the occurrence to a wilful breach of faith or premeditated treachery on my part. What you will now do relative to my unprincipled husband, I know not, but I have little doubt that you will find means to propitiate if not to disarm him in respect to his infamous designs toward yourself.

"The haste and anxiety I exhibit in penning these lines will, I hope, convince your ladyship that it is my sincerest desire to divest myself as much as possible of the odium which in your ladyship's estimation may attach to my seemingly treacherous conduct of last night, and if I append no name or initials to this note, your ladyship will not imagine that I am afraid to allow such a document with my signature to remain in your hands. It is merely a precaution which I adopt lest the note should fall into the hands of others."

"Ah!" said Venetia, on whose countenance a ray of intelligence had gradually beamed as she perused this singular epistle, "I now begin to understand the whole affair. It is as clear as daylight that some lover, whom Mrs. Malpas preferred to her husband, found his way last night to her chamber. But who could it be? Captain Tash was closeted and concealed in the housemaid's chamber at the very time when you and Malpas gave the ineffectual summons at the spare bedroom door. The lover, then, was doubtless already at that moment in the room with Mrs. Malpas, and Captain Tash had no doubt been pandering to the suddenly improvised amour. Now, was that lover my husband or the prince? For between those two the matter appears most certainly to rest."

"Lord Sackville, please your ladyship," said Jessica,

" went out soon after ten o'clock, and did not return till about three this morning. These facts I learned from his lordship's valet."

" Then the lover of Mrs. Malpas during the past night," said Venetia, " was the prince! " and for a few moments a shade came over her resplendent brow and she bit her scarlet lip with vexation. " But of that no matter," she suddenly exclaimed. " I am not jealous of the prince. I know full well," she continued, the glow of triumph lighting up in her eyes and flushing her cheeks, " that if he now and then wanders away for a short while from the sphere of my influence, with a look or a word can I bring him back to my feet. But I am angry, I am indignant, oh, I am almost disgusted with myself," she cried, in a state of excitement that rendered her grandly and terribly beautiful at the moment, " when I think that, discomfited, vanquished, and defeated, I was compelled to surrender myself to the arms of that dastard Malpas."

" Your ladyship has ten thousand sources of consolation," said Jessica, " for one annoyance of this kind. Brilliant, courted, worshipped as you are, all kinds of happiness are within your reach and at your disposal — "

" Enough, Jessica," cried Venetia, a profound mournfulness suddenly seizing upon her, and as a deep sigh, amounting almost to a convulsive sob, made the rich volume of her bosom upheave as if it were about to burst from the prisonage of the corset, she turned aside for a moment and with a great effort subdued an outburst of grief.

Jessica said nothing, did not even appear to notice this sudden change in her mistress's mood, but bustled about the boudoir as if to arrange three or four things that required putting in order.

" Now, my excellent and faithful Jessica," said Venetia, after a pause of a few minutes, " you must at once take this money to Colonel Malpas and tell him that according to the compact entered into between us ere we parted, he will find another sum of a few thousand pounds at the banker's at Geneva when he arrives there. Here is the address of the hotel in St. James's Street where you will find him."

The abigail took the slip of paper which her mistress handed her, together with the bank-notes for five thousand

pounds, and sallied forth to execute the commission just confided to her.

Another female servant now made her appearance with a tray containing Venetia's breakfast, and scarcely had she retired, when Lord Sackville entered the boudoir.

CHAPTER XV

THE AVOWAL AND THE DEBATE

Though Horace had taken more than usual pains with his morning's toilet, in order to divest himself of an agitated appearance, his looks nevertheless at once showed that something unpleasant had occurred. Venetia instantaneously suspected that he had discovered the circumstance of Malpas having passed the night with her, and that he had come to reproach her. Not that he had any right, after the convenient compact made between him and his wife, to interfere with her little peccadilloes, but still it would have been natural enough for him to feel annoyed and disgusted at any seeming favour which she might have shown to such a wretch as Malpas.

Retaining, however, her self-possession, which indeed she seldom lost in the presence of others, she at once said, "Horace, something has occurred. What is the matter with you?"

"My dearest Venetia," he answered, placing himself by her side upon the sofa, "I have something important to tell you, something that you will doubtless hear from other lips presently, and which therefore you had better in the first instance hear from mine."

"But what is it?" she exclaimed, "something terrible, that it requires so solemn a preface?"

"I do not know whether you will scold me for getting into this scrape," said Horace, affecting a laugh, but it was only a sickly attempt at mirth.

"Ah! then it is some dilemma which you have got yourself into?" she said, now suddenly and completely relieved from any fears on her own account. "But what have you been doing, you naughty Horace?"

"Pardon me, dear Venetia," he replied, "if I first remind you of our compact."

"But you told me of that yesterday, when I gave you the money you required," exclaimed his wife, wondering why he should recur to that subject.

"Yes, but you must forgive me if I now specially allude to it again," continued Horace, "because the dilemma in which I am involved — "

"Come, confess the truth without circumlocution," interrupted Venetia, with an arch look, and at the same time tapping him on the cheek with her fair hand. "You have got into some difficulty with a lady. Is it not so?"

"Yes. But have you heard already?"

"No, I merely judge from your manner. You remind me of the compact, which is that you may have as many mistresses as you fancy, and I may have as many lovers as I like," continued Venetia, the carnation deepening on her countenance.

"Well, you have guessed rightly," said her husband. "But the dilemma is a very serious one. There will be exposure, scandal, law-proceedings, and perhaps — indeed, most likely — "

"Ah! a duel," ejaculated Venetia, now turning very pale. "My dear Horace — But who is the lady?" she suddenly demanded.

"The Countess of Curzon," responded her husband.

"The Countess of Curzon!" echoed Venetia, with a slightly perceptible start, for she could not help being struck, at the moment, by the coincidence that she had been criminal with Editha's husband, and her husband had now been criminal with Editha.

"You are astonished?" observed Sackville. "Doubtless you considered Lady Curzon to be the very pattern of virtue and propriety?"

"Let us not dwell upon details," said Venetia, hurriedly. "Give me an outline of the adventure which has resulted in detection and exposure."

Horace did as he was desired, and his wife listened with the deepest attention.

"And the earl," she said, at the conclusion of his narrative, "has declared that he will have satisfaction? But he

has not sent to you yet? You have heard nothing from him this morning?"

"No. Captain Tash is with me," said Horace. "He will be my second if Curzon should indeed send me a challenge — as, of course, he is sure to do."

"But this challenge," said Venetia, hesitatingly, "are you bound to accept it?"

"Good God! can you ask me such a question?" ejaculated Horace. "Even if I knew beforehand that Curzon's shot would stretch me dead upon the field, I must accept the challenge. Honour demands it; and if I have now come to break all this to your ears, it is simply because I did not wish you to receive the tidings suddenly, or through some channel which might misrepresent the facts."

"Misrepresent them!" exclaimed Venetia, now much agitated. "They cannot possibly be made worse, — I mean, in respect to the danger which menaces you. Now, my dear Horace," she continued, in a tone that was tremulous with the strange and conflicting emotions agitating in her breast, "you know that, notwithstanding the destiny on whose waters I am launched, notwithstanding, indeed, the strange mode of life we lead, you know, I say, that I am fond of you. It was our agreement, some months ago, that all sentimental allusions and maudlin professions of love should cease between us, and, indeed, it would have been a mockery had we not resolved on such a course. Yes, a veritable mockery in the presence of the compact which allows each such unlimited license. But at a moment when your life is threatened, I may be permitted to observe that notwithstanding all that has taken place and all that is taking place, I still experience for you those feelings which will not permit me to hear with indifference of the danger which you are incurring. Indeed, I cannot bear the thought."

"My dear Venetia, you will almost drive me mad," exclaimed Horace, "if you talk thus. You know full well that at the outset I loved you fondly, loved you madly, and in a few short months this affection has not been extirpated from my heart. No; and notwithstanding I have plunged into dissipations, notwithstanding I have been seduced into this intrigue, the secret of which has now so suddenly exploded, yet is there still a niche within my soul where your

image is enshrined. The artificialities with which rank and wealth have surrounded us have not destroyed all natural feelings within me. Besides, you know, Venetia, you can believe me when I declare that I should have been happier had we on the day of our marriage retired to some humble and secluded cottage, rather than have plunged into the brilliancies, the elegancies, and the luxuries of a court life. But having been compelled, as it were, to accept this latter destiny, it was better to yield to the force of the torrent and give way to all pleasure and profligacies, if only for the sake of drowning regretful or remorseful thoughts."

"Ah! my dear Horace," said Venetia, gently passing one of her arms around his neck and drawing him toward her, "this is one of those scenes of tenderness which a husband and wife in our condition ought to avoid, and which nevertheless has its soothing influences, its ecstasies of pleasing pain, its paroxysms of torturing bliss. Yes, dear Horace, though shame be upon either brow, though when inspired by the best feelings of our nature, we dare not look each other in the face, and though now, as your cheek is pillowed against mine, each one burns with the flush of shame, nevertheless we are not indifferent to each other; and to me the thought is harrowing that in a few short hours thine handsome form may become rigid, thine eyes closed in the sleep of death. No, no, this duel must not be!" she added, with passionate vehemence.

"But my honour will be compromised," said Horace. "Candidly speaking, Venetia, I am no coward, I do not shrink from death, and were I compelled to go forth with an army to battle, it would be in the foremost ranks I should be found. But I freely confess that it is hard, yes, it is hard, to stand the chance of being thus cut off in my earliest prime, when rank, honours, and wealth have only just begun to lavish their favours upon me. Besides, Venetia, of the two courses which are open to every man in this life, namely, the good and the bad, I have chosen the latter, and for this sacrifice of all my bettermost feelings, the only compensation can be found in a long life of pleasure and enjoyment. These are the reasons which almost render me a coward when I think of this duel. And then, Curzon, too," he added, "is a matchless shot, so experienced with the pistol that — "

"Oh, your words freeze the blood in my veins," cried

Venetia, shuddering from head to foot. "No, no, my dear Horace, this duel must not take place."

"Ah! vainly do you talk, my poor Venetia," said her husband, "for on the one hand the wretched code of honour will compel Lord Curzon to send me a challenge, and on the other will force me to accept it."

"And this is because he discovered you with his wife?" said Venetia, in a musing tone, as she gazed abstractedly upon her husband, for it seemed as if some thought or scheme was now developing itself in her mind.

"Yes, that is the plain English of the matter," replied Horace.

"Ah! I understand," ejaculated Venetia. Then as her eyes suddenly assumed another and peculiar expression, fraught with a deep and mysterious meaning, she said, "Do you remember, Horace, that on the first occasion you ever required money — it is now some months ago — you said that you consulted me, knowing that I was a woman fertile in expedients?"

"I remember it perfectly," returned her husband, "and I might reiterate the averment now. But what has that to do with the present position of affairs? Believe me, my dear Venetia, there are no means of staving off the present danger. It must be encountered boldly, although, to confess the truth," he added, in a mournful tone, "I experience terrible misgivings amounting to a presentiment as to the result."

"Then I beseech you, Horace, to put faith in my ingenuity," exclaimed Venetia, with the air of one who already has resolved upon some settled plan of action.

"But remember, my dearest wife," said Horace, "that anything you might do in this matter would be to compromise my honour most seriously, because the challenge must be accepted — "

"Now, leave it all to me," interrupted Veentia, with one of her sweetest smiles accompanying a look of confidence and encouragement. "But I am about to give you an instruction which you must obey to the very letter."

"Proceed," said Horace, wondering what possible scheme his wife could so suddenly have devised, but still experiencing sufficient faith in her prudence, tact, and knowledge of the world to feel assured that in whatsoever she might do she

would not compromise his honour in respect to this duel which appeared inevitable.

"Return you to Captain Tash, and remain with him until you receive a message from me," said Venetia. "Then, so soon as Jessica repairs to you with the intimation that I wish to see you, do you come straight hither and enter the boudoir at once, without hesitation, and without the ceremony of knocking at the door."

Horace was about to inquire an explanation relative to this extraordinary instruction, but Venetia good-humouredly cut short all further discourse, and compelled him to quit the room.

A few minutes after her husband had thus left the boudoir, Lady Sackville rang the bell, and when Jessica answered the summons, she said, "You have returned, then, from executing the commission with Colonel Malpas?"

"Yes, your ladyship," was the abigail's reply. "I saw the colonel, gave him the money, and delivered your message. He says that he shall set off at once, and as the northwestern part of the Continent is now so unsettled in consequence of French affairs, he shall not attempt to pass along the Rhine, but shall take ship for the Mediterranean and by those means reach Geneva."

"Good!" said Venetia, in a tone of approval. "And now, my dear girl, you must at once proceed to Grosvenor Street and see the Earl of Curzon. If he be not at home, wait for his return, and when you see him, tell him that if he values my good opinion and friendship he will at once pay me a visit."

"But has not your ladyship heard," said Jessica, stammering and hesitating, "of a certain circumstance? The whole town is ringing with it already. I heard the waiters talking of it at the door of the hotel where Colonel Malpas is staying. I also heard of it again at a shop where I stopped to buy something I required — But now your ladyship is prepared to hear it — "

"I know everything already," said Venetia, "so don't tarry to converse with me, but start off at once and deliver my message to Lord Curzon. Tell him that I have heard of what has taken place, and that therefore I am well aware he cannot openly visit Lord Sackville's suite of apartments at Carlton House. Tell him, therefore, that he is to accom-

pany you hither, and you will introduce him by the private door, — as it is absolutely necessary I should see him without delay."

Jessica accordingly sped upon this errand, and on arriving in Grosvenor Street, she found that Lord Curzon was at home, but engaged with his solicitor on urgent business. On hearing, however, that it was Jessica who wished to say a few words to him, he immediately granted her an audience in another room, and on receiving the message which she delivered, he appeared to be uncertain how to act. The abigail urged upon him the necessity of complying with her mistress's desire, and he gave his consent, for he not only was loath to quarrel with Venetia, but he was also anxious to hear what she might have to say, a presentiment informing him that it was relative to the transactions of the preceding night, though how Venetia purposed to interfere in them, he was at a loss to understand. However, to be brief, he dismissed his solicitor for a couple of hours, and bidding Jessica hasten homeward, he soon afterward sallied forth and rejoined her in the neighbourhood of Carlton House.

The cunning abigail speedily introduced him into the palace, and led him unobserved to Venetia's boudoir, where he was welcomed in the most charming and flattering manner by the divinity of the place.

Having bade him sit down upon the sofa, Venetia told Jessica to withdraw, but as the faithful abigail was retiring, she whispered in her ear the following rapidly uttered instruction: "Listen attentively for the boudoir bell, and when you hear it ring, go and tell Lord Sackville that I wish to speak to him immediately."

CHAPTER XVI

THE WIFE'S STRATAGEM

We must now observe that during the interval of Jessica's absence to fetch the Earl of Curzon, Venetia had thrown off her gown and put on a loose morning wrapper, thus leaving herself in an elegant undress. She likewise allowed her hair to flow in all its auburn richness and silken luxuriance over the shoulders, which were now left bare in their dazzling whiteness, while a few stray tresses were suffered to fall around her throat and over her bosom, where they lay like dark gold upon polished ivory. Into her looks she had thrown all that sensuous wanton languor which rendered her so dangerously enchanting and so overpoweringly captivating in the presence of a man endowed with strong passions.

Nor was the effect of all this preparation on her part and of the luxurious exposure of her rich and resplendent charms lost upon the Earl of Curzon, notwithstanding his mind had been so much occupied with other things. Moreover, although he had once revelled in those beauties on which his eyes now settled eagerly and intently, yet it was but once, and that was far, very far, from being sufficient to sate the strong passion with which Venetia had inspired him from the very first moment of their acquaintance.

The reader is of course aware that after a certain communication which Venetia had received from Colonel Malpas, she could not in her heart entertain anything like a favourable sentiment toward the Earl of Curzon. When with the colonel on the Continent he had evidently talked of his amour with herself; perhaps, for anything Venetia knew to the contrary, he had even boasted elsewhere and to others of the conquest he had obtained over her. At all

events, he had betrayed the delicate circumstance to Malpas, and this was a crime which Lady Sackville was not likely to forgive. If, then, we find Venetia now affecting the amiable toward Curzon, smiling upon him, placing herself upon the sofa by his side, and at once bending upon him a look and assuming an attitude which seemed to declare that she was not unmindful of their past intimacy, if we behold her doing all this, it was because she had a special purpose in view and a particular object to accomplish, to the carrying out of which she made all her feelings of dislike toward the earl entirely subordinate.

"I thought, Charles," she said, "that the very first person you would have seen, on returning to London, was myself," and as she thus spoke she threw into her looks an expression of tender reproach.

"My dearest Venetia," he said, "I should have communicated with you this afternoon. Most assuredly I should not have ventured to call upon you after the transactions which occurred last night, and in which I am so painfully and seriously involved with your husband."

"Come, tell me all about it," said Venetia, throwing one of her snowy arms around his neck, and leaning toward him in such a way that her bosom reposed upon his breast and she could thus gaze up into his countenance; "tell me, I say, all the particulars of this adventure, for you and I, Charles, at all events, are not going to quarrel."

"You know not how unspeakably happy you render me by this assurance, dearest Venetia," exclaimed Curzon, bestowing deeply sensuous caresses upon the wife of that man whom he was about to challenge to a mortal duel for having intrigued with his wife. "You look handsomer than ever, Venetia. You are indeed grandly beautiful," he continued, and his fingers played with the shining tresses of her luxuriant hair.

"Well, you shall compliment me presently," she said, with a smile displaying the two rows of pearl which, gleaming in contrast with the moist scarlet of her lips, seemed the ivory portals through which the balmy breath of heaven itself came forth. "Tell me again, I ask you, the details of this adventure of last night."

"You must know, my dear Venetia," responded the earl, "that for some time past — seven or eight months, perhaps

— I have suspected, or, rather," he continued, "I have had positive proofs that my wife was a thorough intriguante."

"And pray, are you the most immaculate of men?" inquired Venetia, with an arch smile.

"No, far from it," responded Curzon, snatching a kiss from her lips; but he immediately added, "I do not choose my wife to pursue a similar game."

"Then how you must despise, scorn, and loathe me," said Venetia, but with a certain haughty mockery in her tone. "Am not I a wife, and yet have I not forgotten myself with you? Am I not likely to do it again?"

"Ah! but you are one of the world's exceptions," exclaimed Curzon, not knowing exactly what response to give. Then, after some little hesitation and with a certain confusion in his looks, he said, "But wherefore shall we continue this topic? It only makes me say things disagreeable to you, and I would not for the world offend or annoy you, Venetia."

"You neither offend nor annoy me," she observed, with a peculiarity of tone and look which for the moment seemed to have something sinister in it; but as her countenance suddenly lighted up, she exclaimed, in a blithe voice, "I know very well that I am different from other women, and there lives not a man on the face of the earth who can either scorn or despise me."

"True, most true," exclaimed Curzon, bestowing upon her another caress. "Well, I was about to explain that on the Continent I met a person who revealed to me all the secrets relative to Editha's misconduct, and how artfully she managed, by the aid of her principal tirewoman, a girl named Gertrude, to carry on her intrigues in such a way that none of the servants, save this confidential one, could possibly suspect what was going on."

"And who could have been base and mischievous enough to give you such information?" asked Venetia, her suspicions instantaneously settling upon Colonel Malpas.

"Ah! my charmer, I must not tell you that," said Curzon, patting her face.

"Well, go on," she said, with an arch smile. "I do not wish to penetrate more deeply than you choose into your secrets. I suppose, however, that, having gained this information on the Continent, you lost no time in turning it to account the moment you came back to London?"

"Such was indeed the case," rejoined the earl, "and it was in order that I might carry out my project at once that I did not instantaneously present myself at Carlton House on my return. In fact, I only arrived yesterday evening, at about seven o'clock, and going, in the first instance, to see a friend of mine, or, rather, a young man who is interested in my affairs, I sent him to Grosvenor Street with a letter saying that I should not be at home until this evening. Ah! my dear Venetia, pardon me if I say I know your sex so well that I felt assured my wife would at once communicate with her paramour, even supposing that she had not an appointment with him for the night."

"Oh, what a calculation on your part!" exclaimed Venetia, in a tone of mock rebuke. "What an opinion you must indeed have of our sex! But pray go on. I am interested in these proceedings which you are relating."

"Well," continued the earl, "at about eleven I went home. If I had found Editha, I should of course have told her that I had been enabled, after all, to return more speedily than I at first anticipated; but she was not at home, and I understood that she had gone to Lady Lechmere's. Ah! then I knew at once that I was on the right track. I accordingly proceeded thither. But public rumour has doubtless told you all the rest that occurred?"

"Yes," replied Venetia. "And now, do you not think that you have been very foolish? How can you possibly find fault with your wife?"

"Ah! my dear Venetia," exclaimed the earl, "if you force me into explanations, I must give them. My disposition is a curious one, and rakish, profligate, dissipated though I may be, I could not endure the thought that my wife should follow in the same path. It may be unjust, it may be preposterous —"

"Well, we will not comment any more upon this part of the affair," interrupted Venetia. "But tell me, are you going to challenge Horace to a duel?"

"I must," answered the Earl of Curzon. "But I promise you, my dear Venetia, that I will fire very wide of the mark. Not that I suppose you care overmuch for your husband —"

"You talk of purposely missing your aim," said Venetia, hastily, "but by that very attempt you may hit him, for

is it not sometimes the random or ill-directed shot that takes the fatal effect? "

"And yet I must challenge him," reiterated the earl. "You know very well, my dear Venetia, how peremptory is the code of honour."

"Honour!" echoed Venetia, and her beautiful lips writhed in superb disdain. "Now tell me, is not this thing that you call honour the most wretched, paltry, miserable scarecrow of a sentiment that ever was? Horace is as justified in intriguing with your wife as you are in intriguing with his, if if there be any justification at all. And yet because you happen to have found him and your wife out, you must fight a duel."

"To be sure," exclaimed Curzon. "Suppose that he had found you and me out, should I not be compelled to go and fight a duel with him?"

"Ah! it is a wretched affair, this code of honour of yours, after all," said Venetia. Then, as she started somewhat abruptly from the sofa, she said, "I think that I have a book here which exposes the folly of duelling."

Thus speaking, she advanced toward a side table which stood in a recess of the chimneypiece, and while pretending to be in search of a book, she pulled the bell-wire, unperceived by Lord Curzon.

"No, I cannot find the volume," she said, and returning to the sofa, she placed herself in the same voluptuous contact with him as before. "Now, do you not think you are acting foolishly? Tell me the truth," and she began to lavish upon him a perfect torrent of caresses, which seemed of the tenderest as they were certainly of the most exciting nature.

She fastened her lips to his, she threw her arms around his neck, and during the intervals of the warm and fervid kisses which they thus exchanged, she breathed the tenderest expressions in his ears. Intoxicated with a sense of bliss, the Earl of Curzon forgot all about Editha, all about his contemplated lawsuit. He thought only of this woman of glorious beauty and of enchanting fascinations who was now placed in such close contact with him, and yielding to the influence, the almost maddening influence, of his desires, he was on the point of snatching the last crowning bliss, when the door of the boudoir was suddenly burst open and Lord Sackville appeared upon the threshold.

The Earl of Curzon gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay while starting from Venetia's arms as if she had suddenly changed into a serpent. Then, as he beheld the scarlet glow which flamed up on the countenance of her husband, he naturally thought that it was a fiery indignation which was thus expressed. But though perhaps for the first instant there might have been such a feeling in Sackville's heart, yet it was rather with amazement that he was thus inspired, — amazement mingled with a feeling of shame, too, at the spectacle that now met his eyes. But almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, and of course penetrating the stratagem which Venetia had thus adopted, he closed the door, locked it, and advanced a few paces farther into the boudoir.

Curzon knew not what to say or what to do. He was overwhelmed with confusion, until Venetia suddenly bursting out laughing recalled him to a full sense of his position. Yes, and all in a moment the truth flashed to his mind. It was a stratagem on the part of Lady Sackville to place him and her husband precisely on the same footing toward each other. But, heavens! what an utter profligate did Venetia now seem in his eyes! What a shameless meretricious woman had she thus rendered herself! Such were the thoughts that flashed through the mind of the Earl of Curzon all in a moment.

"I congratulate your lordship," he said, a withering irony in his accents, "upon the possession of such an amiable and excellent wife, who thus readily sacrifices herself in order to save you from a duel to which I now of course cannot challenge you."

"At all events, my lord," retorted Horace, his countenance again becoming scarlet, "since I know myself to be profligate and debauched, I am not base enough to go laying snares to entrap my wife, nor unjust enough to reproach her when I find that she goes astray."

"Well," said Curzon, contemptuously, "I do not think we need stand here bandying words. 'Tis quite apparent now that I cannot challenge you to meet me at a dozen paces, nor can you challenge me. Neither can I very well bring an action against you, nor you against me."

"It would indeed be the most ridiculous pair of lawsuits," observed Horace, "that ever were brought before the

cognizance of a tribunal. But how is the complicated affair to end?"

"Perhaps this fair divinity, the goddess of intrigue as well as of beauty," said Curzon, with a bow of mock solemnity toward Venetia, "will condescend to issue her instructions; for it is quite clear that her ladyship's dramatic imagination has contrived this splendid equivoque. Heavens! if it should be lost to the theatrical world, what a misfortune would it be!" added the earl, in a tone of bitter irony.

Venetia, who had been listening with calm indifference to the observations thus made by the Earl of Curzon, now deemed it time to develop her views.

"You both stand in a strange position toward each other, it is true," she said, "and you neither appear to understand how there can possibly be an issue from the dilemma. Now, as all the world is already acquainted with the discovery of your intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, it becomes absolutely necessary that you should fight a duel with Lord Curzon. The code of honour, as he has assured me, requires this pleasant little proceeding, or else he would be deemed and proclaimed a coward by all his friends as well as his enemies. A duel, then, there must be. But, on the other hand, how can Lord Curzon possibly seek your life, Horace, for having dishonoured him, when he in the same manner has dishonoured you? And it will not do to tell the world that there is tit for tat in this affair. In the first place, it would not suit the earl even to have the fact made known at all, because he wishes to obtain a divorce from his wife, which he could not procure if his own conduct were made public. He would be held undeserving of the remedy. Then, in the second place, there is no need to make public the scene which has now occurred, because you, Horace, do not wish to expose your wife, you do not seek a divorce from her, you have no vindictive feelings to gratify. As for the Earl of Curzon, he, of course, as a man and as a gentleman, will maintain a profound silence also relative to the scene that has just occurred. Now, therefore, you begin to comprehend how stands the matter between you, and yet it is most contradictory, most anomalous, most paradoxical. For the world, knowing only of your intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, will, according to the code of honour, look for a duel between yourself and Lord Curzon; whereas you,

Lord Curzon," she continued, " on the other hand, cannot possibly stand up to take my husband's life under the circumstances which have now transpired, but which are not to be made known to the world. Such is the contradictory position. But know ye what is to be done? "

Venetia stopped short as she asked this question. Both her husband and the Earl of Curzon gazed upon her in unfeigned surprise mingled with curiosity. The latter even forgot his rage and hate at the stratagem of which he had been made the dupe, so completely was his interest now enchained in the part which this extraordinary woman, as extraordinary as she was beautiful, was taking in these delicate and difficult matters.

" Well, neither of you seems to be able to answer my question," she continued, after a pause of nearly a minute. " I will tell you, then, what is to be done. There must be a sham duel. Yes, a duel in which there shall be every appearance of hostile intent, in which the pistols shall be loaded with powder and ball, duly discharged, pointblank, as I believe the phrase is, and even fired a second time, if you will, but leaving you both unscathed and unhurt, after all."

" If such a proceeding can really take place," said the Earl of Curzon, still under the influence of astonishment, " it will assuredly be the best manner to settle the present difficulty. A due homage will thereby be paid to the opinion of the world, the laws of honour will be openly satisfied, and privately no unfairness will have been committed between your lordship and me."

" I am perfectly agreeable," said Horace, " for of course, under present circumstances, I cannot wish to let you have the chance of taking my life, and I assuredly am equally repugnant to take yours."

" But respecting the action for crim. con.," said the Earl of Curzon, " which must precede the suit for a divorce in the House of Lords? I have already consulted my solicitor upon the subject."

" Ah! your lordship has not suffered the grass to grow under your feet since your return to London," exclaimed Venetia. " But since you appeal to me relative to this new question, is there not such a thing as seeking only nominal damages? — in which case Horace will, of course, offer no opposition to the action."

" Yes, the legal portion of the affair can be thus managed," said the Earl of Curzon. " But your ladyship has yet to tell us how this sham duel, as you call it, is to be managed."

" I chanced a few days ago," said Venetia, " to take up a book in which were recorded many curious experiments of legerdemain, sleight-of-hand, and conjuring tricks, and one of the feats described was most ingenious and interesting. It was that of a conjurer suffering a person to fire a loaded pistol at him, a pistol charged with ball."

" But what was the ball made of? " asked Curzon, with an incredulous curl of the lip.

" It was a ball of hollow glass filled with quicksilver," answered Venetia, " and when such a bullet is held in the hand it feels of the same weight as a genuine one, the appearance of which it also has to the eye."

" Excellent! " exclaimed both Horace and Curzon, now in the same breath, for they both perceived in an instant how Venetia's idea of a sham duel could be carried out.

" Now, Horace, you can withdraw," said his wife, " and I will summon Jessica to conduct the Earl of Curzon as privately as possible out of the palace."

" In the course of the day, then," said Horace, with a cold salutation, " your lordship will send some friend with a challenge, according to the wonted formalities? "

" I shall do so, my lord," responded Curzon, likewise with a haughty reserve.

Venetia now rang the bell, and her husband at once issued from the boudoir.

" Now, my dear Curzon," said Venetia, the moment they were once more alone together, " you must not be angry at what I have done, for I was resolved to put an end to this duel, or, rather, to disarm it of its dangerous character. Come, tell me you are not angry, for assuredly I do not wish to quarrel with you," and as she spoke she lavished upon him such intoxicating caresses that he rapidly experienced a thaw in the ill-humour which he had conceived against her. " I forgive you for the harsh and biting words you used just now toward me," she added, " and therefore — "

" Well, dearest Venetia," said Curzon, " you must admit that the stratagem of which you made me the dupe was enough to irritate me."

" Hush! no more of all this," she said, gaily and archly

placing her hand upon his mouth. "Now sit down once more, and tell me all that occurred at Geneva."

At this moment a knock was heard at the door, and Venetia ordered Jessica, from whom the summons came, to return in half an hour, for she had only rung the bell in the presence of her husband to make him believe that Curzon was at once to take his departure, and that she had no private business with him.

The earl accordingly proceeded to give Venetia an account of just as much as it suited him to relate concerning his proceedings at Geneva. He did not mention the name of Malpas, and she did not choose to mention it either. In fact, her only object was now to ascertain the precise position in which affairs seemed to be in the household of the Princess of Wales, and if she showed herself thus affable, condescending, and kind toward the Earl of Curzon, it was merely because she deemed it prudent to conciliate a man who was acquainted with so many of her secrets.

At the expiration of the half-hour Jessica returned to the boudoir, and Curzon was then stealthily conducted from the palace.

Venetia now remained alone, alone to ponder upon all that had taken place, and to plunge into those meditations which the development of her career, with all its varied incidents, was so well calculated to engender. Was not all sense of virtue now lost within her soul? Had she not become shameless in her depravities and brazen in her profligacies? Yes; nor did she attempt to conceal this fact from herself. On the contrary, she was resolved that so far as the power of her beauty and the witchery of her fascinations could serve her purposes of ambition or of intrigue, of amorous gallantry or of subtle design, she would never hesitate to render those means available.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GATHERING STORM

At about the same hour that the scene which we have just related was taking place at Carlton House, another of a very different character, but of equal interest in the development of our tale, was occurring in the City.

Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, was seated in his private office, examining the letters which had arrived by the morning's post. His countenance was haggard and careworn; there was an occasional quivering of the lip which denoted an inward excitement of no ordinary degree, and as he opened letter after letter, his hands trembled with nervous agitation. Ever and anon he gave a kind of convulsive start, as if suddenly becoming aware of the moral weakness to which he was thus yielding and the physical derangement that was accompanying it, and then he would compress his lips and clench his fists violently, and even stamp his foot upon the carpet, as he said to himself, "This is ridiculous! this is childish! Things cannot be so bad as my fears portray them."

But things were bad, though, and very bad, too, with Mr. Emmerson the bill-broker. Several unfortunate speculations had within the last few months crippled his resources, and the enormous drains which his amour with Lady Curzon made upon his purse tended still further to hamper him. Concurrently with these progressive sources of ruin, the extravagances of his family had increased at Clapham, and in the endeavour to outshine all their neighbours, his wife and daughter had set no bounds to their profusion. But, as Emmerson day by day had seen his own affairs becoming more involved and his family's expenditure growing more lavish, a feeling of pride mingled with alarm had prevented

him from communicating to his wife the state of his finances and the necessity that existed for economy. Yes, pride, because he could not bring himself to give utterance to the humiliating words which should enforce the necessity of retrenchment, and alarm, because he felt that if he were to show any outward sign of his embarrassments, all his creditors would become clamorous at once, his credit would be stopped, and his destruction accelerated. Thus, the extravagances at home had gone on increasing while his means of supporting them were diminishing, and although his wife and daughter observed at times that he became thoughtful and sombre, and though they even detected an expression of perfect agony occasionally sweeping over his countenance, yet they quieted their own fears with the thought that too close an application to business was the cause of Emmerson's altering looks, and not for a moment did they choose to suspect that any trouble was being introduced into his finances.

In addition to the above-mentioned causes of pecuniary embarrassment, Emmerson had recently stood an expensive contest for the aldermanic gown of one of the City wards. Here again did the pride of a man who was so strong in oppressing all whom his usurious practices brought within his scope become his weakness, and though at the very first moment, when a deputation of his friends waited upon him and asked him to stand as a candidate, he was frightened at the enormous expense into which it would lead him, he nevertheless had not the courage to breathe the word " no." The canvass therefore took place, and judging by the promises received, Emmerson's success appeared certain. But when the day of election came, many of those who had pledged themselves to support him, stopped away, while others actually went to the polling place and recorded their votes against him. Vain had been all his expenditure to ensure his election, equally vain and futile had proved his frothy vapourings relative to " our blessed Constitution " and " glorious laws." It was evident that some mysterious agency had been at work to undermine him, and that to such dark and insidious manœuvrings was his defeat to be attributed.

While still smarting under the galling sense of a failure which, prominent as he had made himself as a common

councilman, was absolutely ignominious, Emmerson began to observe that some of his most influential City friends seemed less cordial than they were wont to be. At first he thought that this was mere fancy on his part, but he soon received such signal proofs to the contrary that he was compelled to confess to himself that his character was waning and his credit diminishing. Fresh evidences of these facts promptly developed themselves. His bankers wrote a peremptory letter to remind him that he had latterly been overdrawing his account and paying but little money in; two or three capitalists, of whom he had for years past been enabled to obtain any sums he required, were full of excuses when he now demanded their aid. One had "locked up all his funds," another had "decided upon turning his floating capital into other channels," and a third "could not possibly oblige Mr. Emmerson on the present occasion." But this was not all. Some of his best clients — well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally wanted the accommodation of a few thousands or hundreds, and who did not mind paying handsomely for the loan thereof for a short time — found out some other bill-broker who charged a lesser interest, and thus Emmerson's business was rapidly falling off.

Still these were not all the evils and misfortunes that were closing in around him. During the last week or two, reports had been privately whispered both in the City and at Clapham that his affairs were embarrassed beyond all remedy. Bills then came pouring in upon him, and he found, to his horror and dismay, that large accounts for upholstery, jewelry, wine, millinery, and so forth, for which he had given his wife the money, remained unliquidated, she having lavished the funds in other ways. That his approaching downfall was rumoured, soon reached his ears by several disagreeable means. His wife had a quarrel with a female servant whom she threatened to discharge, whereupon the woman blazed forth in a fury of invective and taunt, declaring that pride would have a fall, and that everybody knew the end of all this pomp and ostentation was at hand. Then Mrs. Emmerson's eyes were suddenly opened to the truth, and she charged her husband with his financial embarrassment, as if it constituted a positive crime of which he had been guilty toward her. As a matter of course, he turned upon her with virulent reproaches for her extrava-

gance, and thus a terrible scene took place, of which all the servants were listeners. On going into the City on that occasion, Emmerson found that all persons who had any claims upon him there were getting very pressing for payment, and in the course of a few days they grew absolutely clamorous, acting and speaking as if they were secretly urged on by somebody who was giving them to understand that unless they became thus importunate it was very likely they would never be paid at all.

Such was now the position of Emmerson's affairs; and the reader will not therefore be surprised at finding him in such a nervous, excited, and agitated state as we have described at the opening of the present chapter. Indeed, it was quite clear that matters were coming to a crisis, and although for a few moments he had hugged the belief that "things were not so bad as they seemed," the letters which he was now opening speedily convinced him that things could not possibly be worse. Some of these letters insisted upon prompt settlement of accounts already delivered; others were from solicitors giving notice of actions in cases where many fruitless applications for payment had been made; other letters, again, contained refusals, some speciously apologetic, others laconically blunt, in answer to requests made by Emmerson for loans from former City friends; and other letters conveyed the intimation of the failure of speculations in which he had embarked, and the inability of three or four large debtors to pay him what they owed.

These circumstances were of themselves sufficient to drive even a stronger-minded man than Emmerson to utter desperation. But still they did not constitute the whole sum of the crushing calamities and goading adversities that were hemming him in around. There was yet one other circumstance that cut him to the very soul, for the rumour of what was termed "the *faux pas* in high life," relative to the Countess of Curzon and Lord Sackville, had already reached the City, and thus made Emmerson aware that he had been duped and deluded by a fashionable courtesan who had wheedled large sums out of him under the semblance of affection, while she was all the time intriguing with her patrician paramour.

Bitterly, bitterly did Emmerson curse his folly, now that the infatuation had passed away; deeply, deeply did he

deplore his miserable stupidity in yielding himself up so completely to the Circean wiles and siren blandishments of that titled profligate who had thus taken so large a share in accomplishing his ruin.

Half-maddened, then, was Emmerson as he sat at noon in his own private office, looking over his letters and obtaining a deeper insight into his perplexities as he advanced step by step down the precipice which that correspondence thus developed to his views. And while all these fearful things were forced upon his contemplation, through the whole cloud of miseries penetrated the thought of his astounding folly in respect to Lady Curzon. And how humiliated, how profoundly humiliated, did he now feel when he reflected that the haughty peeress, so far from ever loving him, the plebeian money-grubber, had been making a tool and an instrument of him the whole time; and that if she had encouraged him to quit the dingy regions of the City in order to enter the paradise of West End fashion, the portals of which had unfolded their wings at her magic touch to give him admission, it was only because the enchantress had her own selfish purposes to serve. For he felt, full keenly felt, that those golden gates of high life's Elysium would now be as sternly and mercilessly closed against him as the doors of a workhouse are to a pauper who has no settlement in the parish; and he almost gnashed his teeth with rage as he reflected that, although he had paid thousands of pounds for the privilege of basking in the sunlight of patrician beauty and mingling with the other gilded insects that flitted about in the roseate floods of luxury, yet that he was only a plebeian intruder and vulgar interloper, after all.

Such was Emmerson's state of mind on the day of which we are now writing. Having gone through all his correspondence, as a man traverses a district where nature presents nought save features of horror, gloom, and danger, unrelieved by a single spot of refreshing verdure or floral colouring, he started from his seat and began pacing the room with rapid but uneven steps.

What was he to do? Should he become bankrupt, pass through the ordeal of that tribunal so humbling to commercial pride, so ruinous to the credit of the money-grubber, and then seek to begin the world anew? Or should he gather together such wrecks of his late immense resources as he

could possibly accumulate, and fly to Canada, or some part of the world where, under another name, he might enter upon a fresh career? This latter idea was the one that pleased him best. He was so disgusted with the extravagances of his wife and daughter, forgetting that he himself had first encouraged them in a lavish expenditure, and then had not courage to check it when it exceeded all reasonable bounds, that he resolved to leave them behind him to shift for themselves. Heartless, selfish, and cruel was this man, even at the very moment when it was most natural that he should seek the solace and the sympathy of those whom he thus coldly and deliberately determined on abandoning for ever.

As a matter of course, Emmerson was too cautious to confide to any one his intention of departing from the country. But still he could not make all the necessary preparations himself. There were certain little sums of money owing to him in different quarters, and most of which might be obtained upon application, but he could not go around collecting them himself, and indeed it was absolutely necessary that this duty should be performed by Varian.

"But will he suspect anything?" asked Emmerson of himself, suddenly stopping short in the midst of his agitated walk as the necessity of employing Theodore in the business thus struck him. "No, I do not think that he will suspect. Ever since he returned to me, he has been docile, meek, and obliging, he has done everything he could to regain my confidence, and it is clear, from a few words which he has occasionally let drop, that he himself does not imagine my affairs to be very seriously embarrassed. I do believe he is a good, kind-hearted, faithful creature, after all, and that I treated him cruelly and harshly when some months ago I sent him to Newgate. Well, then, it is not likely he will suspect anything, and if he do, he would not betray me. No, I might almost make him a confidant of my intentions, and yet it were better that I should not trust him further than is necessary. But, at all events, I will now speak to him and watch his countenance narrowly."

Having thus mused, Mr. Emmerson composed his features as well as he was able, took a glass of wine from one of the sample bottles which he invariably kept in his office, and

then summoned Theodore Varian to his presence. The young man entered with an air so perfectly frank and open, and at the same time so respectful, that the bill-broker perceived therein the corroboration of all the reflections he had just been making with regard to him, and reseating himself at the table, he said, "Shut the door, Varian. I wish to speak to you for a few minutes."

Theodore did as he was desired, and as he approached the table, he said, "Two or three persons came inquiring for you just now, sir, but as I knew you were occupied with your letters, I said you were not in at the moment."

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson, "then I suppose you knew they were persons whom I did not wish to see?" and he fixed his eyes steadfastly upon Theodore's countenance.

"I did certainly entertain that impression, sir," replied Theodore, totally unabashed and unmoved, indeed, not appearing to observe that his master's eyes were settled upon him, "because the persons came for payment of their accounts. But as I know that your resources are all locked up for the moment in your numerous speculations, I took it upon myself to give the answer which I have mentioned."

"And you have not only done well, but also reasoned correctly," said Emmerson, with an approving smile. "In fact, Theodore, you have been long enough in my office and are well enough acquainted with the commercial world, to know that there are times and seasons when even the richest and the most prosperous merchants, traders, and speculators are temporarily embarrassed. Such is the case with me at the present moment. I have thousands locked up in ventures which are really no ventures at all, because they are safe as the Bank of England itself; and, moreover, certain remittances which I have been expecting from the Colonies have not yet arrived. The consequence is, that I am somewhat hampered for the present."

"All this is precisely what I knew, sir," remarked Varian, with every appearance of the most genuine sincerity, "for I felt convinced that a gentleman of your intelligence and business habits could not be involved in serious difficulties."

"Of course not! The idea would be ridiculous indeed!" exclaimed Emmerson, laughing, but it was a hollow and unnatural laugh, the laugh of desperation. "But I tell you what we had better do, Mr. Varian," he almost immediately

continued. " You shall go around collecting the small sums that are due, and I will get in the large amounts. I think in the course of the day we may manage to do this, and then we shall be able to make up our books so as to see correctly how matters stand and settle the liabilities that are most pressing. And then," added Emmerson, assuming an air of proud assurance, which Heaven knows he did not feel in his heart, " I shall get a loan of twenty or thirty thousand from my bankers to answer my purposes until other moneys begin to flow in again."

" If you will give me a list, sir, of the persons who owe small sums, I will go around at once," said Varian.

" Here is a list which I have already made out," said Emmerson, and he handed his clerk a piece of paper.

Theodore then sallied forth, inwardly chuckling at the thought that the hour of his vengeance was approaching, for he had not the slightest difficulty in penetrating the design of his master. On the contrary, he saw plainly enough that Emmerson was endeavouring to " make up a purse " wherewith to flee from the country, and he resolved to apply the spark to the train of combustibles that were now ready to explode around him.

Mr. Emmerson also sallied forth, but it was not, as he had alleged, to collect any large sums. He wished to Heaven that there were any such sums which he was able to collect at all. But he went forth to keep up appearances with Varian, and likewise to avoid the duns who were calling every quarter of an hour at his office. In his desperation, however, he resolved as a last resource to call upon two or three wealthy friends with whom he had been accustomed to have large transactions, but whom he now found inaccessible to his demands and his representations. Vainly did he assure them that " there was a most excellent opportunity of investing a few thousands at twenty per cent., if they liked to go shares with him in the enterprise and advance a part of the capital." They refused him in a manner which as plainly as possible told him that they would not entrust their funds in his hands, and though he endeavoured to ride the high horse, he nevertheless went forth from their counting-houses crestfallen and downcast.

He returned to his office at about four o'clock, and found that Varian had already come back. Yes, the young man

had been there alone for the last half-hour, having sent the boy out upon some pretence, and during this half-hour he had procured from Emmerson's desk the document which he had promised to deliver into the hands of the Earl of Curzon. But at the moment when Emmerson returned, Theodore was seated at his usual place in the front office, attending to his business with a placid and calm demeanour, as if nothing unusual had happened and nothing of an exciting character was going on.

"Well, what luck?" inquired Emmerson, affecting an air of indifference, though all his plans depended upon Varian's answer.

"I have succeeded, sir, in every quarter," replied Theodore, "and have collected the several items upon this list. Here are three hundred and seventy pounds in all."

"Good!" exclaimed Emmerson, scarcely able to conceal his joy; and he felt at the moment that even in the midst of the most desperate circumstances there may be yet a gleam of hope and a source of cheerfulness.

Having counted the money, he placed it in his pocket, observing, with an apparent offhand manner, "that he himself had been very lucky and had collected a few thousands." He then entered his inner office, sat down, and began to reflect profoundly upon an idea which within the last hour or two had been gradually expanding itself, as it were, in his mind.

And what was the subject of his thoughts, — that subject which had now become all-absorbing and all-engrossing as he sat with his elbows resting upon the table and his hands supporting his head? He had made up his mind to fly from England, and he had procured the means of doing so. In a few hours he meant to be off. In a word, he had resolved upon bidding farewell to England for ever. Then why depart with barely four hundred pounds in his pocket? What a beggarly amount, what a wretched sum, for a man who had been accustomed to command the use of thousands! Could he not by some means treble or quadruple the sum which he had in his possession? Yes, there was a method which he might adopt, and this was by means of a forgery.

Such was the idea on which Emmerson now pondered. He examined the matter in all its bearings, weighed its chances of success, calculated all the risks of discovery.

Well does the proverb say that " the man who deliberates is lost." Whenever an evil idea enters the head, if the individual have not the courage to seize it by the neck at once as he would a snake that turned to bite him, he is led by an invisible fascination to look at it in the face, examine it, reflect upon it, and suffer it to haunt him until it becomes his master at last. So was it with Emmerson, and having thus yielded to the influence of his iniquitous promptings, he proceeded with careful deliberation to execute the crime.

A bill of exchange, payable at twenty-one days after date, was duly drawn up by his experienced hand, and across it he forged the names of a large trading firm with whom he had had many previous transactions and whose respectability was sufficient to render the bill easy of negotiation. It was for the amount of fifteen hundred guineas, and looked altogether, in Emmerson's estimation, as genuine a document as ever was presented for discount. But nevertheless, the moment he had put the finishing stroke to the forgery, he felt a strange sensation pass over him, as if his position had changed all in a moment, and bad as it was before, had now become ten thousand times worse. Five minutes back, and it was merely the bankruptcy court and the King's Bench that threatened him; now he had laid himself open to the Old Bailey and Newgate. Ay, and this was not all, for with the mere fact of tracing those few black lines upon a slip of paper, the still blacker spars of the gibbet had suddenly started up before his view.

But Emmerson was not the man to be deterred by mere imaginary terrors from his purpose. He was in that condition which is most friendly to the designs of Satan, most favourable to the temptations in which the Evil One seeks to ensnare frail humanity. Accordingly, Emmerson put the bill into his pocketbook, and issuing forth, paused in the front office to say, " Well, Mr. Varian, it is time to lock up. Be here early in the morning, as we shall then go over the books together."

With these words the bill-broker took his departure, hugging the idea that his intention was totally unsuspected by his clerk; but had he seen the strange expression which passed over Varian's countenance the instant the door closed behind him, he would not have felt so happy nor so confident in the course which he was pursuing.

Proceeding straight to his bankers, he entered the spacious establishment, — one of those which are said to render Lombard Street the richest in the world. Without pausing at the counter, he passed straight on to the private parlour, and there, in an offhand manner and with his usual tone of confidence, he handed the bill to one of the partners, requesting that it might be discounted. The demand was promptly complied with; Emmerson received the money, and sallied forth from the bank. He then returned to his office, which Theodore Varian had in the meantime quitted, but only to keep watch upon his master and dog his movements.

Procuring the key from the housekeeper who had charge of the chambers, Emmerson was enabled to penetrate into the offices, and shutting himself up in his private room, he went carefully over his papers, destroying a great number, and retaining a few which he believed to be necessary or useful for his future purposes. It did not strike him that Editha's letter had been abstracted. Now that so many grave and important matters pressed upon his attention, he did not even recollect that he had placed any one of her letters in his writing-desk.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when Emmerson issued forth again from his chambers, thinking to himself that he was bidding them farewell for ever. At that moment he experienced a sad and painful tightening at the heart. Not that he thought of the wife and daughter, whom he had resolved to leave behind him and abandon to poverty and all its attendant evils; no, it was of lost position that he thought so regretfully, and he inwardly cursed himself for having allowed extravagance and folly thus to hurl him from the pedestal of that happiness which, according to the fashion of his own mind, he had at one time created.

Entering a hackney-coach near the Mansion House, he ordered the driver to take him to the Bull and Mouth, Piccadilly. That establishment was at the time of which we are writing, and for many years afterward, — until the genius of steam wove its web of railways over the surface of the land, — the great central point whence started innumerable coaches for all parts of England. Thither it was that Mr. Emmerson now repaired, and thither also was he closely followed by Theodore Varian.

But the young man was not now alone. He had two persons with him, — none others, indeed, than Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom.

On arriving at the Bull and Mouth, Mr. Emmerson alighted, dismissed the hackney-coach, entered the office, and was making some inquiries at the counter relative to the stages to Liverpool, when he felt a hand suddenly laid upon his shoulder. He started as if it were the touch of death, started as if the invisible fingers of the destroyer had suddenly sent an ice-chill penetrating through his frame, and turning quickly around, he beheld himself face to face with Theodore Varian.

Not a word did he utter, for he saw in a moment that he was lost. The thunderclap of doom sounded, as it were, upon his ear, and he knew that he was betrayed as indubitably as if the young man had already proclaimed the fact from his lips. Besides, those ominous countenances that peered over Varian's shoulder, Emmerson knew them well; for Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom had been the instruments of many and many a bitter persecution waged by the bill-broker against poor wretches who were unable to meet his usurious demands.

"You thought to escape?" said Varian, in a low, hoarse tone, full of concentrated passion, and fixing a look of inexorable bitterness upon the fallen man, "but you are mistaken."

"Stand aside, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech as a ray of hope flashed upon his mind; for, in the first place, it was evident that the forgery had not been discovered, or else they would be criminal and not civil officers who had come to arrest him, and, in the second place, if the writ held by Mr. Ikey was for a sum which Emmerson could pay, as he had nearly two thousand pounds about his person, he might yet get clear off in spite of Theodore Varian. "Now, Mr. Ikey," he said, drawing the Jew aside and speaking in a low tone, so as not to be overheard by the clerks and other persons transacting business in the coach-office, "what claim have you against me?"

"Three thousand four hundred," Theodore hastened to observe, his voice sounding ominous as that of doom over Emmerson's shoulder. "I persuaded your largest creditor

to do it, and if you can pay that amount, then I am very much mistaken."

"Tree tousand four hundred guinish ish de sum," said Mr. Ikey, corroborating Theodore's statement, "and my expenshes ish a mere trifle, Mishter Emmershon. You know as well as mosht men what ish de expenshes in dese matters," and Mr. Ikey gave a coarse, familiar grin. "But come, let's step into de public-housh closh by, and talk it over."

"It is of no use," interjected Theodore, sternly. "Let him pay the money, Mr. Ikey, or go to prison. You know that I represent the creditor in this instance."

"Dish de truth wot he say, Mishter Emmershon," observed the sheriff's officer, in an ominous undertone, as much as to imply that he could show no mercy even if he were inclined.

Pale and trembling, the wretched Emmerson was utterly unable to conceal the horrible alarms that were now torturing him, for he saw that if he were plunged into a debtor's prison, it would only be with the certainty of removal in a short time to Newgate, when the forgery should be discovered. But the very desperation of his case suddenly inspired him with a last hope, and in a quick, anxious voice, he said to the Jew, "Mr. Ikey, you have known me for many, many years, you have had a great deal of money through the business I have put in your way, and you will now take my word that I will call upon you to-morrow — "

"'Tish impossible, Mishter Emmershon," interrupted Ikey. "My orders ish poshitive. Tom, keep de door."

"All right," growled the bailiff's follower, planting himself on the threshold.

"You will take fifteen or sixteen hundred guineas as a guarantee of my good intentions," said Emmerson, actually writhing with the anguish of his thoughts.

But the sheriff's officer shook his head, and Emmerson felt a cold perspiration burst forth all over him. The condition of the wretched man was indeed most deplorable, and visibly did his looks grow so haggard, even as he stood there in that public office, that in the space of three or four minutes twenty years seemed to have been added to his life.

As a last resource he turned toward Varian, and in a manner so humbled and with accents so full of pitiable

entreaty that he now indeed appeared a spectacle well calculated to provoke contempt, he said, " Theodore, I forgave you. Cannot you forgive me? For God's sake, have mercy upon me. If you say the word, I feel convinced that this Jew will take what I have to offer and let me go. You have declared that you are empowered by the creditor to do the best for his interests — "

" Viper! " was the low but bitter, oh, fearfully bitter and venomously malignant ejaculation which suddenly hissed, as it were, from Theodore's lips and struck the wretched Emmerson dumb at once.

To be brief, the bill-broker, with despair in his heart and frenzy in his brain, was forced to surrender himself into the keeping of Mr. Moses Ikey, and in half an hour he found himself a prisoner in that very same sponging-house to which he had in his time sent so many, many victims of his usury.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHAM DUEL

It was soon after six o'clock on the following morning, that a carriage and pair entered upon Wormwood Scrubs, in those times, and even down to the latest days, a famous resort for duellists. It is at no great distance from London, but is nevertheless sufficiently retired and lonely for the purpose to which it seems specially appropriated, and when viewed at that gray hour of the morning, the scene presented an aspect more than usually savage and desolate.

Forth from the carriage descended the redoubtable Tash, with a pistol-case under his arm, and with an air of such swaggering importance that it seemed as if he had come out into the suburbs because London itself was too confined to hold him. He was followed by Lord Sackville and Doctor Thurston, and leaving the carriage, they advanced to some distance, where they were met by Lord Curzon, the Honourable George Macnamara, and Doctor Copperas.

Curzon and Sackville appeared to take no notice of each other, but Captain Tash at once walked up to Macnamara, and seizing him by the hand, shook it so heartily that the gentleman on whom he thus bestowed this mark of his cordiality actually writhed in the captain's iron grasp.

"Glad to see you this morning, my dear fellow," said Tash. "You and I have met before at drinking bouts, and in one or two street rows, but never on so agreeable an occasion as the present, and my only regret is that we are not the principals instead of the seconds."

"Captain Tash," said the Honourable George Macnamara, somewhat coldly, "you must be well aware that we have no time to waste in idle comments. Come, let us measure

the ground, load the pistols, and get over this business as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible!" vociferated Captain Tash, looking both amazed and indignant. "You may as well tell me, when I have paid my money at the door of the theatre, that the performances are to be hurried over with the most indecent haste, or that if I am sitting down to a good dinner, I must not detain the dishes above a minute. By all daggers and wounds! I, Rolando Tash, protest against such a doctrine."

"Well, well, captain," said Macnamara, "you and I will not dispute."

"Egad! but I think that it is most likely we shall," retorted the gallant officer. "The fact is, I have not shot a man for the last six or seven years, and I think it is high time I should do so, just to keep my hand in."

"Be pleased to understand, Captain Tash," said Macnamara, with mingled hauteur and contempt, "that I am no coward, but at the same time I am not to be bullied into a duel with any one."

"Bullied!" roared Tash, his voice now sounding half-across the scene of action, and his countenance becoming as red as the comb of a turkey-cock, "what do you mean, sir?"

But here Horace at once interfered, peremptorily whispering to the captain that if he did not command his temper the post of "second" should be withdrawn from him, whereupon the gallant officer, though grumbling somewhat at what he called "the liberty of the subject being interfered with, when merely seeking to blow another's brains out," consented to proceed to the business of the meeting without further comment or noise.

Meanwhile Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston had stepped up to each other, shaken hands, and exchanged their usual compliments in that fashion which constitutes the "aside" of the stage, namely, appearing to say something which is not meant to be overheard, but in reality bawling it out loud enough to make every word audible to all present.

"My dear Doctor Copperas," said Thurston, "who would have thought of meeting you here this morning and under such circumstances? But I must say that in the midst of

the gloom which this pending duel naturally throws around us, nothing could give me greater satisfaction than to find that you are present on the occasion, for I am well aware that no member of the faculty has devoted more attention to wounds by bullets than yourself."

"Unless, my dear Doctor Thurston," said Doctor Copperas, "it is yourself. Indeed, as I said in the *Medical Reformer* last week, there is no follower of Esculapius living who has the same experience as you in a certain class of hurts and injuries."

"Why, my dear Doctor Copperas," said Doctor Thurston, "it was the very same opinion that I passed upon you, at the very same time, too, in the *Scalpel*."

And as they thus spoke, the two physicians threw a side-long glance toward the duellists and the seconds, to observe whether their dialogue produced any effect upon those noblemen and gentlemen.

Meantime Captain Tash and the Honourable Mr. Macnamara were getting on more comfortably together than at first. Each had a pistol-case containing a pair of the murderous weapons, a flask of gunpowder, and several bullets, and they proceeded to load in each other's presence.

"These are Sackville's pistols," said Tash, "and a very excellent pair they seem to be. I could wing a fellow at twenty paces with them."

"And these pistols are mine," observed Macnamara. "Curzon did not possess a pair of duelling pistols."

"Neither would Sackville have had these," remarked the gallant officer, "unless I had assured him some weeks ago that it was highly necessary for a finished gentleman — we put the nobleman out of the question in this sense — to have a pair of such barkers as these. Thunder and wounds! I only wish I had the handling of them just now. I could riddle my opponent through and through, and I feel just in the humour to do it, too," added Tash, again looking grimly upon Macnamara, as if he thought it a very great shame, amounting almost to an insult, that this gentleman did not at once take the hint and offer to fight him.

"These are not my bullets, though," said Macnamara, without heeding the captain's last observation. "Curzon gave them to me just now. Did you ever see bullets so

perfectly round and so smooth? They are the prettiest little things I ever beheld in all my life."

"So they are," observed Tash, "and it really makes one envy the lucky dog that is to be riddled with such little darlings. But mine, you perceive, are equally good. I wonder where the deuce Sackville got these splendid bullets from. Like yours, they are as round as possible, and as smooth as an egg. Really it must be quite delicious to receive one's knock-me-down blow from such elegant little bullets," and this time the captain threw a glance of mingled entreaty and reproach upon the Honourable George Macnamara, as much as to say that if the idea of being killed with such pretty bullets did not render him disposed to fight, nothing would.

"Now, are you ready?" asked the latter, still paying no heed to Captain Tash's nonsense.

The ground was measured, Curzon and Sackville were placed at an interval of twelve paces, and while Captain Tash handed a weapon to his principal, Macnamara performed the same kind act toward the other. Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston remained standing at some distance, gazing with professional sang-froid upon the duellists. The signal for firing was given by the dropping of Captain Tash's handkerchief, and then, as the pistols exploded, Doctor Copperas suddenly started convulsively, feeling himself all over to ascertain whether one of the bullets might not have diverged and accidentally hit him, while Doctor Thurston, who was braver than his companion, flung a quick glance toward Curzon and Sackville. But he seemed horribly disgusted on observing that neither of them had fallen; for the truth was, that he rather wanted at least one of them, if not both, to be winged or lamed, so that additional éclat might be given to the duel in the newspapers, the effect of which would be a proportionate puff for himself and Doctor Copperas.

But, thanks to Venetia's forethought, no blood was destined to be shed on the present occasion. The bullets which had been used, and which had attracted so much admiration on the part of Mr. Macnamara and Captain Tash, were indeed nothing but thin glass globes filled with quicksilver, and made by a glass-blower to the order of Mr. Plumpstead, the Sackvilles' butler, who had procured the

same on the previous evening. But of course Lord Sackville and Lord Curzon looked as grave and solemn as if it were really a matter of life and death between them, while Macnamara and Tash naturally supposed that everything was fair and proper, as they had not been let into the secret of the sham bullets.

Now, as it was the Earl of Curzon who, being ostensibly the aggrieved party, had challenged Lord Sackville, it was for the former to declare whether he was satisfied by the shots that had been exchanged, and to the ineffable disgust of Captain Tash, Mr. Macnamara said, on the part of his principal, " Lord Curzon has no desire that this should go any further. He now reserves his wrongs for the consideration of that tribunal to which, as a matter of course, he will appeal."

Captain Tash was too conversant with the laws of duelling to persist in compelling the principals to continue hostilities, but " he did not see the slightest reason why himself and Macnamara should not have a round or two with each other, just by way of ball-practice." Such, indeed, was the proposal that he made with all the coolness in the world, and in those very words.

" Since the captain," said Macnamara, coldly, " is so anxious that I should put a bullet through his head, I must really gratify him, in order to get rid of his importunity."

" Not so," exclaimed Lord Curzon, flinging a glance of profound contempt upon Captain Tash, " for in order that there should be a duel, there must be seconds, and I for one shall refuse to act in a case where no true and genuine cause of dispute has arisen."

" And I also shall refuse to serve as a second," said Horace. " Come, Tash, no one doubts your courage, though every one does your prudence. Put up the pistols and let us be gone."

" By Heaven! I wish I had not left Robin at home," said the captain, terribly put out at the idea of having nobody to fight with. " He should exchange shots with me, I swear. It is not once out of a hundred times that I stir out unattended by my man Friday, and now, on the very occasion when he is so much wanted, he is not here. But I have it," he suddenly exclaimed, his countenance brightening up. Then, taking off his big bell-shaped hat, and ad-

vancing in the politest manner possible up to the two doctors, he said, with corresponding urbanity of tone, "Gentlemen, which of you would like to exchange a shot or two on the present very suitable occasion?"

"Permit me, my good sir," said Doctor Copperas, looking very hard at the captain, and, without any further ceremony, he began feeling the valiant officer's pulse, a proceeding which so astonished our friend Tash, that he stood transfixed for upwards of a minute, gazing in speechless astonishment upon the learned member of the faculty.

"Well?" said Doctor Thurston, inquiringly, as he watched the proceedings of his colleague.

"Quick and feverish pulse," said Doctor Copperas. Then, looking with ominous intentness into the captain's face, he said, "Go home, sir, get your hair cut close, put a blister behind your ears, avoid all alcoholic drink, keep yourself very quiet indeed, and don't eat too much meat, nor let that be underdone, for you are assuredly of a sanguineous temperament, and, I may indeed say, of sanguinary disposition."

Captain Tash was so astounded at this long and not altogether intelligible harangue that he stood rooted to the spot for nearly a minute; then turning suddenly upon his heel, he muttered to himself, "These fellows understand nothing but boluses and black draughts, and know no more of the laws of honour than I do of the Chinese language."

But here we may close our description of this mock duel, pausing only to observe that the two parties returned to town in their respective vehicles, neither the seconds nor the physicians having entertained the slightest suspicion that a conjurer's trick had suggested the idea for the bullets which were used upon the occasion.

And now, as Captain Tash had predicted, Horace Sackville indeed became the lion of the day. His name was in everybody's mouth; that is to say, in all the fashionable quarters of the metropolis. Envied and courted as he had been before, his popularity among a certain class increased a thousandfold. "Oh, that naughty Sackville! That dear, delightful, wicked Horace! That dangerous duck of a man!" and other expressions of a similar character were heard in all the drawing-rooms at the West End. That Venetia should take no possible notice of the matter, but appear as

if she were not even acquainted with her husband's " naughty doings " at all, was quite consistent with the aristocratic and fashionable idea in such matters. But there was not a titled demirep nor a patrician courtesan who did not affect to speak with the most contemptuous pity of the disgraced and lost Countess of Curzon, so that while Horace the seducer was everywhere caressed and flattered, Editha the seduced was everywhere spoken of with an ironical commiseration.

" Poor creature! " said the demireps and scandal-mongers, " she is done for now. But it is just what was to be expected, considering the family she belongs to."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECOND JOURNEY ON THE CONTINENT

The reader has doubtless ere this begun to experience some surprise that we have so long appeared to lose sight of Jocelyn Loftus, but we now propose to turn our attention to that excellent and high-souled young man.

It will be recollected that when last we saw him it was in London, whither he had proceeded from Canterbury in obedience to a letter privately written to him by the Princess Sophia. It was on that occasion also that he had attended the private theatricals at Carlton House, and that he had experienced such strange feelings on beholding Lady Sackville upon the mimic stage. Nor less will it be remembered that the interview which he succeeded in obtaining with the prince regent terminated only in inspiring him with loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary. Indeed, so convinced was he of the unmitigated profligacy and dissoluteness of the prince that he felt persuaded it would be altogether useless to intercede with such a man on behalf of his injured wife. Therefore was it that Jocelyn, after having written a letter to Venetia and after a second interview with the Princess Sophia, returned to Canterbury.

But, as a matter of course, his presence at the private theatricals had been duly reported to Mrs. Owen at Richmond and to the queen at Windsor; and as it was believed from the fact of his having sought an audience of the prince that he was still interesting himself in the affairs of the Princess of Wales, the conspirators had immediately resolved to place a spy upon his actions. Thus was it that on his return to Canterbury he was followed by a trustworthy agent of those conspirators.

We must here observe that at his second interview with

the Princess Sophia he had obtained from her Royal Highness a letter of introduction and recommendation to the Princess of Wales; and provided with this credential, he resolved to put his already well-considered scheme into execution, namely, to set out on another journey to seek the injured wife of the regent. As a matter of course, he dared not pass through France, and he had to choose between two distinct routes in order to reach Italy, where the princess was at that time, for it was the month of December to which we are now for a brief space referring. In the first place, Jocelyn might proceed through Belgium, along the Rhine to Switzerland, and thence into Italy; or, in the second place, he might embark on board some vessel bound for the Mediterranean and thus land on the Italian coast. But in consequence of the inclemency of the wintry season and the probable delay that might arise from adverse winds, he renounced the latter project in favour of the former one; and to this course he was more inclined by the gentle persuasion of the charming Louisa, who shuddered at the thought of his encountering the perils of the sea. But we should observe that although the beautiful maiden thus found herself so soon compelled to separate from her lover again, and though she was not without misgivings that he might become exposed to fresh dangers, yet she did not strive to dissuade him from his generous purpose, because she experienced the deepest sympathy and the kindest commiseration in respect to the persecuted Princess of Wales.

Therefore, after a very short sojourn at Canterbury, Jocelyn Loftus set out again for the Continent, little suspecting that he was now closely watched by the spy whom the conspirators had set to dog his movements. Traversing Belgium, he entered the Prussian territory, and embarked at Cologne upon the Rhine, which he pursued until he reached Basle in Switzerland, and thence he resolved to travel post into Italy. Passing by Neufchatel and Geneva, he in due course arrived at the town of Chambery, which is in the kingdom of Piedmont, but within eight or ten miles of the French frontier. This place he reached on the tenth day after leaving England, and, according to the intelligence which he received, the Princess of Wales and her suite were at that time staying at Milan. Accordingly, Jocelyn Loftus, after having rested at night at Chambery, ordered

a post-chaise for the purpose of prosecuting his journey toward the capital of Lombardy, and now it was that the spy who had so unweariedly pursued him was enabled to carry into effect the instructions he had received ere leaving England. For, by means of bribing the postilions, he induced them to take the road toward the French frontier instead of that leading in the direction of Milan; and as Jocelyn was a perfect stranger to the route and was, moreover, absorbed in his reflections, he did not immediately notice that the vehicle was pursuing a southwestern instead of a southeastern direction. Nor were his suspicions excited until the chaise stopped in about an hour at a little town where the well-known uniforms of the French custom-house officers immediately met his eyes.

Then it immediately struck him that either some strange mistake had been made, or some foul treachery practised, and on inquiring the name of the place, he was informed that it was Les Echelles, a town on the French frontier. His passport was demanded, and with a sore misgiving did he produce it, for he now beheld a certain English traveller whom he had seen at one or two points during his journey prompting the custom-house officers in their present proceeding. We need not inform the reader that this " certain Englishman " was the spy of the conspirators, but we may hasten to observe that Jocelyn was at once taken into custody on the double charge of travelling with a passport made out in a false name, and having escaped from the prefecture of police in Paris. Remonstrance was of course ineffectual, and our young hero was borne off to the prison at Grenoble a large and celebrated French town at a distance of about thirty miles from Les Echelles.

He was not, however, treated with any rudeness or unnecessary harshness, and inasmuch as before he left England he had taken the precaution of having the Princess Sophia's letter sewn in the lining of his coat, it now escaped detection when he was required to produce the contents of his pockets. No stricter personal search than this was made by the officers, and thus the cherished credential passed not away from his possession at the same time with the other papers which were taken from him.

Behold, then, Jocelyn Loftus once more a prisoner in France, a captive, too, at the instance of those same con-

spirators in England who had been the means of provoking his former prisonage.

It is not our purpose to dwell at any considerable length upon this episode in the life of Jocelyn Loftus, but a few particulars are nevertheless necessary in order to give an idea of the treatment which he experienced during the renewed period of imprisonment that was now taking place. Two apartments on the debtors' side of the gaol at Grenoble were furnished in a comfortable and even handsome manner for his reception, a valet was specially appointed to wait upon him, and any orders which he chose to issue relative to his repasts were accurately attended to. One of the yards belonging to the prison was assigned solely to his use for taking exercise, but every precaution was adopted to prevent him from holding the slightest communication with any of the prisoners in the other parts of the establishment.

These details will sufficiently show that the French authorities were well aware that Jocelyn had committed no real offence, but that his captivity suited the purposes of certain high and influential personages in England. The governor of the prison behaved toward him in the most respectful manner, and visited him at least two or three times a week to inquire concerning his health, and ascertain whether all his wants were properly attended to. It was on the occasion of one of the earliest of these visits that the French governor addressed Jocelyn Loftus in the following terms:

" You may rest assured, sir, that not the slightest intention is entertained of using unnecessary harshness toward you, and I am instructed to state that if there be any relation or particular friend in England, or elsewhere, to whom you may wish to write occasionally, in order to relieve their minds from any uneasiness on your account, you are at liberty to do so, and I pledge you my honour as a gentleman that your letters shall be duly transmitted. At the same time, you will of course understand, sir, that you are not to state that you are in captivity, nor yet that you are at Grenoble; but you can date your letters from any other city or town of France, and request that all replies may be sent to the post-office of such town, in which case those answers shall be duly forwarded to you hither. You will also take care to avoid inserting in your letters anything

that may engender the suspicion that you are subject to coercion or restraint; and, in a word, you must place nothing upon record that may lead your friends in England to suspect you are not at liberty, and thus induce them to enter upon intrigues or adopt plans for the discovery of your whereabouts and the accomplishment of your rescue. Of course the letters that you may write will be perused by me before being transmitted to the post, and the answers sent thereto will also have to pass through my hands. Understanding the English language perfectly, I shall reserve this duty of supervision to myself, instead of entrusting it to any underling or interpreter. Thus, sir, so long as you adhere to the conditions which I have laid down, you need not hesitate to place on record any sentiment or feeling of a near and tender interest, for it will be through no motive of impertinent curiosity that I shall inspect your correspondence, and therefore I shall have neither eyes nor memory for anything that may appear therein, save and except whatever may infringe upon the rules which I have laid down."

Although revolting against the shackles thus imposed upon the manner of conducting his correspondence, Jocelyn nevertheless bridled his indignation, being only too glad at the permission thus accorded to write to any one in England at all. He accordingly decided upon addressing his letters from Lyons, that being the nearest large city to Grenoble, and, as a matter of course, it was to Louisa, his well-beloved Louisa, that he wrote. In his letters to her he first stated that circumstances which he should explain when next they met compelled him to date from Lyons, but that she need not be alarmed on perceiving that he was in France. Subsequently, as week after week of his imprisonment passed away and he was still compelled to date from Lyons, he declared that the circumstances previously alluded to in his earlier correspondence remained unchanged, but he carefully avoided any allusion that might lead his beloved Louisa to fancy that he was unhappy. On the contrary, he wrote in cheerful terms, far more cheerful than he felt; and this he did, not only to avoid infringing on the conditions so specifically laid down by the governor, but likewise because he did not choose to torture the charming girl by arousing any suspicions or fears in her mind relative to his actual position. For he saw plainly enough that even were

she to ascertain the exact truth as to the circumstances in which he was placed, she could not help him; and thus, for more reasons than one, did he write in a manner as cheerful, as reassuring, and as encouraging as possible.

Louisa's answers were in the tenderest and most affectionate strain, and it was evident that, although she suspected not his captivity, she nevertheless would have felt more completely at her ease if he were out of France altogether. But as several weeks passed away, and she found (as she fancied) that he had nothing to complain of, and no perils or calamities to report, she grew tranquillized as to his continued sojourn on the French soil. At the same time, she frequently expressed her surprise at his protracted residence in Lyons when the English newspapers stated that "a certain royal lady and her suite" were sojourning elsewhere; but when the fair Louisa's letters did contain an allusion of this kind, it was invariably followed by some such observations as these: "However, you are no doubt acting for the best, and I shall await your return in much suspense to hear from your own lips all that you are doing. You assure me that you are in good health and that I need not alarm myself as to your safety; you likewise give me the most affectionate assurances of your unchanging love, and, therefore, what else can I require?"

Most dear to Jocelyn were these letters that he received from his beloved Louisa. They were indeed his whole and sole solace, for he knew not when his captivity was likely to terminate. The governor had repeated to him those same proposals which were made by the prefect in Paris, namely, that if he would sign a solemn bond pledging himself to future non-interference in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, he should be immediately set at liberty; but to this condition, which our hero considered derogatory and dishonourable to a degree, he positively refused to subscribe. He therefore remained in prison, wondering how long it would be ere circumstances might take such a turn as to give him his release.

Thus weeks and months passed away, and at length, in the early part of March, the starting intelligence was one morning communicated to Jocelyn's ears that Napoleon Bonaparte, having fled from his little sovereignty of Elba, had landed in France and was advancing with a handful of

men toward Grenoble. Still the governor maintained his authority in the prison, and when the emperor — for as such did he return to France — entered Grenoble and was immediately joined by the garrison of the place, Jocelyn besought that his case might be represented to the imperial hero. The governor, however, assured Jocelyn that his instructions were to the effect that the affair of his imprisonment was to be kept altogether secret, and that so long as the present Minister of the Interior remained in power at Paris, he (the governor) could know no other authority. Thus Jocelyn's hopes of being enabled to obtain his freedom through the intervention of Napoleon were for the moment defeated.

Toward the end of March the emperor reached Paris, Louis XVIII and his Ministers all flying precipitately. A new Cabinet was of course installed, and so soon as the intelligence thereof reached Grenoble, the governor of the prison, who was naturally a kind-hearted man, hastened to Loftus, exclaiming, " Now at last may I venture to report your case to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor Napoleon."

Jocelyn was at first overjoyed at this apparent change in the circumstances of his position, but his spirits were somewhat damped again when the governor observed that there was a rumour of a general outbreak of hostilities in consequence of Napoleon's return, and that if this were true Jocelyn might still be retained in captivity as a prisoner of war. However, without being dismayed by this probability, and wasting no precious time in gloomy forebodings, Jocelyn drew up such a memorial as he thought would appeal to the generosity of Bonaparte, and this was at once transmitted to Paris, along with a corroborative report drawn up by the governor of the prison. It was not to be expected that very prompt attention would be paid thereto, for the emperor was necessarily immersed in business, and nearly a month accordingly passed ere a response was received. At length it came, and was entirely favourable to Jocelyn's views. In an official document from the Minister of the Interior, it was methodically set forth that " the French authorities had no right to constitute themselves policemen or gaolers to suit the aims of a foreign prince; and that as for Jocelyn Loftus being detained on the ground of travelling with a false name, such a satisfactory explanation had been given

in the memorial sent to his Imperial Majesty that the immediate release of the aforesaid Jocelyn Loftus was ordained."

Thus was it that at the commencement of May our hero recovered his freedom, and in the sincerest manner did he express his gratitude to the governor for such kindnesses as he had experienced at his hands. He at once took a post-chaise and proceeded to Chambery in the Piedmontese dominions, and here he learned that the Princess of Wales with her suite was residing at a beautiful villa in the neighbourhood of Geneva. But ere he pursued his journey, Jocelyn wrote a long letter to Louisa, explaining to her everything that had taken place, — how he had been imprisoned at Grenoble, and the circumstances under which he had penned all his correspondence with her and had received her replies. He also poured forth in an enthusiastic strain his declarations of unvarying affection, for he felt that he could now give free vent to his feelings in that respect without the risk of having his letters read by stranger eyes. He also said that he was at present on his way to Geneva to see the princess, and he hoped that in a very short time he should be enabled to return to England and conduct his beloved Louisa to the altar. He also wrote a letter to Lady Sackville, with the contents of which we are not, however, at this period of our narrative, supposed to be acquainted.

Having passed the night at Chambery, Jocelyn started at an early hour on the ensuing morning for Geneva, and as he was borne in the post-chaise along one of those splendid roads for which all the provinces of Savoy and Piedmont are famous, he weighed in his mind the course that he ought to adopt in fulfilling the mission with which he had charged himself toward the injured wife of the prince regent. If she were still surrounded by the spies and agents of the conspirators, as he had every reason to suspect, it would perhaps be difficult for him to obtain access to her; and if the three Misses Owen still formed a part of her household, they would not merely do all they could to prevent her Royal Highness from granting him an audience, but might even have recourse to representations calculated to blacken his character. He knew how completely her Royal Highness had been under the supervision of the spies and enemies

who surrounded her, and there was every reason to suppose that this supervision had not been relaxed during the last four or five months. Thus, though he was on the highroad to Geneva, and though he would soon be within sight of the princess's dwelling, and perhaps able to advance up to her very front door, yet was it possible that, after all, he might experience considerable difficulty in obtaining access to her.

Having duly considered these matters, Jocelyn determined upon entering Geneva in as private a manner as possible, and instead of taking up his quarters at one of the fashionable hotels, procure some humbler lodging, so that he might stand the less risk of having his presence known in the city previous to obtaining an interview with the princess. On arriving within four miles of Geneva, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Jocelyn halted at a village the picturesque appearance of which delighted him so much that he longed to ramble for an hour or two in its beautiful environs. Moreover, as he had determined upon entering Geneva at dusk, he thought he could not do better than dine at this village, and he accordingly ordered the post-chaise to be put up at the little inn which occupied a prominent position amongst the few buildings constituting the place. Before he set out for his ramble, he sought the landlord to give instructions relative to his dinner, and the pretty peasant-girl who acted as waitress introduced him to the master of the establishment, a stout good-looking man, who at the moment was engaged in conversation with another traveller. This individual had just arrived in a chaise, and was a thin, pale-faced, keen-eyed man, dressed in black.

"I propose to stay here until the evening," said Loftus, who, as the reader is well aware, was proficient in the French language, which was spoken in all that district, "and on my return from a little ramble which I am about to take in your beautiful neighbourhood, I shall be ready for such fare as you may be enabled to provide me."

"This gentleman is also going to dine here in a couple of hours," said the landlord, indicating the individual in black. "Perhaps you two gentlemen would like to dine together?"

There was no objection raised on either side to this proposal, and Jocelyn accordingly set out for his ramble, with the understanding that dinner would be ready at five o'clock. During the interval our young hero wandered amongst the

delicious groves, through the verdant fields, and amidst the vineyards, orchards, and gardens which formed the environs of the beautiful village whose name we have forgotten, but which everybody who has travelled in those parts cannot fail to recognize.

At five o'clock he returned to the inn, and was introduced by the pretty waitress into a neatly furnished parlour, looking upon a garden, whence the evening breeze, balmy and fragrant, was wafted through the open window. The table was laid with characteristic neatness, and the pale-faced gentleman in black, who was to be Jocelyn's companion at the repast, was already there. He was a native of the country, and spoke French with that peculiar but by no means disagreeable accent which marks the Genevese. His appearance was not altogether prepossessing, but Jocelyn was not accustomed to judge men thereby, and as his companion proved to be endowed with great conversational powers, our hero soon forgot his sinister looks in the charms of his discourse. It appeared that he was a professional man residing at Geneva, and that he had come to the little village that afternoon to inspect some property in the neighbourhood which he was desirous of purchasing.

The fact of the Genevese gentleman giving this account of himself was a sort of invitation for Jocelyn to do the same, and our hero accordingly said that he was an Englishman having some particular business of a private character to transact at Geneva, where he did not, however, expect to make a very long stay. He then asked if his companion happened to know whether the Princess of Wales had a large retinue, and in what style she was living.

The Genevese gentleman seemed rather struck by the circumstance that these questions should follow so closely upon the explanation previously given by our hero, and perhaps he inferred therefrom that " the business of a private character " which was taking Jocelyn to Geneva was in some way or another connected with the princess.

" Her Royal Highness," he said, " is living handsomely, but quietly," and here a peculiar smile for a moment curled the individual's lips, — a smile which was so slight and so transitory that it would have escaped observation altogether if its expression had not been so very strange and even sinister.

"But I presume she has rendered herself much liked by her charities, and much respected by her virtues," said Jocelyn, "for she is an excellent lady, a most amiable princess, and one whose purity of character has defied all the slander of her enemies."

"No doubt of it," said the Genevese gentleman, but with a dryness of tone and a peculiarity of manner which Jocelyn could not possibly help observing. "But what do they say of her in England, sir?" he asked.

"The great majority of the people," replied Loftus, "those, indeed, who do not pander to courtly profligacy, and are not deceived by the prejudices propagated and fostered by the blind worshippers of royalty, know that she is innocent of every evil which is imputed to her. Yes, and they know also that she is the victim of a base, systematic, and cowardly persecution."

"You are warm in her defence, sir," remarked the professional gentleman, as he sipped his wine; for we should observe that dinner was served up immediately after Jocelyn entered the room, and that he and his companion were now seated at a table where, although it was but at a small village inn, all the dainties of the season were spread, forming indeed an admirable specimen of the united kitchens of France, Savoy, and Switzerland.

"Yes, I defend the princess, sir," replied Jocelyn, "because I know that she is a victim and not a guilty woman. The vilest charges have been at different times made against her, the most atrocious calumnies have been levelled at her — But you will pardon me, sir, if I grow warm upon this subject, for I feel indignant, as a man and as an Englishman, at the treatment which this foreign princess has experienced from the cold-blooded sensualist, her husband. Can you tell me, sir, whether in her Royal Highness's household there are three young ladies named Owen?"

"Yes, I believe so," was the reply, "and, if I mistake not, they are three very beautiful girls. Yes, to be sure," exclaimed the Genevese, as if suddenly recalling something to mind, "I remember that I once spoke to two of them."

"Ah! then you are acquainted with the persons attached to her Royal Highness?" said Jocelyn, interrogatively.

"No, not to say acquainted," answered the professional

gentleman. "I have had the honour of speaking to two or three of them, as I just now stated."

"Have you ever been inside the villa which her Royal Highness inhabits?" asked Jocelyn, not thinking that there was anything at all indiscreet in the question.

"Yes — no," returned the Genevese, suddenly correcting his first reply. "That is to say, I was once there, but — "

And stopping suddenly short, he had recourse to his wine-glass, as if to get rid of the necessity of saying any more upon the subject.

"I beg your pardon," said Jocelyn, "if I have been putting rude or impertinent queries to you."

"Oh, not at all, not at all, I can assure you," exclaimed the professional gentleman, again becoming all urbanity and politeness.

"We will talk upon another subject," said Jocelyn, perceiving that the former topic was somehow or another disagreeable or embarrassing, and he accordingly began to expatiate upon the beauties of the adjacent scenery and picturesque view which was obtained of the mountains of Jura in the distance.

He found his companion perfectly ready to discourse upon the charming features of his own native clime, and thus the remainder of the dinner-hour was passed away agreeably enough. On the Continent it is not the custom to linger over the wine, and accordingly, soon after the dessert was placed upon the table, coffee was served up, and the landlord then came to announce that the professional gentleman's chaise was in readiness. That individual thereupon took his leave of Jocelyn, without any proposal that they should renew their acquaintance at Geneva; but this was by no means extraordinary, inasmuch as though people may get on very friendly terms together at foreign *tables d'hote*, it does not at all follow that the intimacy should continue when once they rise from table.

"Who is that gentleman?" inquired Loftus of the landlord when his dinner-companion had taken his departure in the hired chaise, or fly, which had brought him thither in the afternoon.

"I do not know, sir; I never saw him before," was the answer. "He came to inquire about a house and garden which are to sell in the neighbourhood, but either they did

not suit his purposes or the price was too high, and so nothing has come of it. When will you have your post-chaise got ready, sir? "

"Not until sunset," answered Jocelyn. "The environs of your village are so beautiful that I shall take another ramble ere I proceed to the city."

Our hero accordingly set off again to visit the adjacent scenery, for, as we have already stated, he did not wish to enter Geneva until it was dusk, the more surely to escape the notice of the Misses Owen, should they happen to be rambling or riding in the suburbs which he would have to traverse. But, seduced, as it were, by the beauty of the scenes amongst which he was now roving, and also giving way to the luxury of those thoughts which were inspired by his recovered freedom and the hope of shortly returning to England to make Louisa his bride, Jocelyn did not notice that he was still bending his steps farther and farther away from the village, although the sun was now setting. At the moment he awoke from a delicious reverie to the consciousness of the fact, he found himself almost close upon the margin of one of those sinuosities of the lake's configuration which indent its southwestern shore.

The hour was delicious. The last beams of the setting sun were glimmering above the heights in the horizon; a gentle breeze prevailed, just sufficient to give a welcome freshness after the heat of the day, but not to ruffle the surface of the lake; and the shepherd's pipe in the distance, the lowing of cattle, and the bleating of sheep, indicated that the herds and flocks were being driven home from the pastures. Although now recollecting that he must be a good three miles from the village, and that the hour was already come when he had ordered the post-chaise, Jocelyn could not help lingering on the margin of the lake to contemplate the effects of the departing sunlight playing flickeringly on that blue mass of sleeping water, while the white sails of a vessel also caught those beams ere they disappeared altogether. And at a distance of about half a mile might be seen the steeples and towers of Geneva, around which, however, the obscurity of evening was now gradually drawing its veil. Altogether the scene was most beautiful, the hour most delicious, and Jocelyn's heart appeared to leap within his breast as he contrasted the enjoyment of freedom

and the power to range and rove amidst nature's sweetest spots at will with the monotony and the suffocating sensation experienced in the tomblike walls of a prison.

While he was thus standing upon the bank of Lake Leman, with the shades of evening closing in around him, he suddenly heard the tones of a female voice at a little distance. Listening more attentively, he could perceive that they were the accents of anguish, the wail of bitter repinings and of despair. Suddenly they ceased, and Jocelyn, straining his eyes in the direction whence they came, thought he could distinguish a female figure higher up the bank toward Geneva. Hesitating whether he should advance and ascertain if it were any distress that admitted of his power to alleviate, or whether such a proceeding might not be an intrusion upon the sanctity of a sorrow that had perhaps sought the solitude of the place and hour to give itself vent and indulge in the luxury of unseen tears, he remained standing where he was. But in a few moments he heard a heavy plunge, as of a human being falling into the water, followed by a gurgling sound. Not another instant did he hesitate, but speeding toward the spot, he at the moment beheld a female, clad in a dark dress, rise to the surface of the lake. Plunging in, Jocelyn grasped her garments, and with some difficulty drew her to land.

She was not altogether senseless, but panted and gasped fearfully, so that he thought life must pass away in the midst of those strong spasms. He scarcely knew how to assist her, for delicacy prevented him from tearing open her garments so as to allow free scope for the expansion of her chest and the full play of the air in her lungs, but he was about to sacrifice this sentiment to the emergency of the case, when the lady appeared to revive all in a moment. We say lady, because such she seemed to be, as well as Jocelyn could make any observation concerning her in the uncertain light which dimly shone upon the scene.

"Oh, what have you done?" she exclaimed, in accents penetrated with despair, as she glanced wildly around and then fixed her eyes upon Jocelyn; but the next moment springing from his arms as he was supporting her, she rushed down the bank and plunged again into the water.

Fortunate was it for her that the moon now suddenly broke forth in all its splendour, bathing the surrounding

heights, the buildings of the city, and the surface of the lake in a flood of the purest silver, so that Loftus at once marked where the lady rose again to the surface, and springing in once more, he caught her, at the very instant she was about to sink, by her long dark hair which was floating like a mourning veil upon the water. Again, therefore, did our young hero rescue the desperate fair one from a watery grave, but as he dragged her up the bank, she struggled violently to disengage herself from his grasp and accomplish her suicidal purpose. For nearly a minute Jocelyn was placed in extreme danger by this proceeding on her part, but he succeeded in retaining the footing he had gained when having dragged the lady within his depth, and despite her resistance he once more landed her safely on the bank.

" I do not thank you, sir, I do not thank you," she said, in English, while gasping for breath. " You have brought me back to a life whence I am resolved to fly."

" Oh, lady," cried Jocelyn, reproachfully, " is it indeed a countrywoman of mine own, a daughter of England, who speaks in such shocking terms? "

" Pardon me, sir, pardon me," exclaimed the lady, her heart suddenly touched by the kindness of Jocelyn's manner, although his words were reproachful. " To you, at least, I owe nothing but gratitude in risking your life twice to save mine."

Thus speaking, she unresistingly suffered him to conduct her away from the brink of the lake, but scarcely had they proceeded twenty yards, when she sank down in a state of exhaustion, though still retaining her consciousness.

Jocelyn raised the lady, and placed her against a bank. He then sat down by her side, urging her to compose her feelings and summon all her presence of mind to her aid, for he feared lest, when her physical energies should return, she might make another attempt upon her life. While thus addressing her, he had an opportunity of observing her more attentively than at first. Her bonnet and shawl, as he was presently informed, had come off when she first plunged into the lake, and her hair was now flowing, dripping with wet and in the wildest disorder, over her shoulders. She wore a mourning dress of excellent texture, and her appearance, despite all present disadvantages, fully indicated her social position to be that of a lady in good circum-

stances. Her features were regular and handsome, her complexion was dark, but now somewhat sallow rather than pale, through grief, and her countenance had a haggard expression. She possessed a fine figure, with a noble bust, and was apparently about twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age.

Such was the hurried survey which Jocelyn was enabled to take of the lady whom he had rescued from death, and at the expiration of two or three minutes the thoughts which forced themselves upon her mind seemed to effect a great change within her.

"It was in a moment of madness, of utter despair," she said, suddenly breaking silence and turning her large dark eyes full upon our hero, "that I made the rash, the wicked attempt upon my life, which your timely presence and noble conduct so providentially frustrated. And, oh, it was the shame, the bitterness, the rage, at having been rescued a first time which made me still more desperate the second time. But, ah!" she abruptly exclaimed, "what must you think of me? What will the world think of me?"

"Lady," said Jocelyn, in a deep and earnest tone, "I am a man of honour, and will never breathe to a living soul, without your permission, the occurrence of this evening. As for what I may think of you, believe me it is in my nature to put the most charitable construction upon your conduct. Then, as for the world, whose opinion you dread so much, wherefore need it ever become acquainted with your secret?"

"Oh, generous young man," exclaimed the lady, with a perfect effusion of gratitude in her accents and in her looks, "you fill me with hope, with confidence, with courage." Then rising abruptly from the bank, she said, "Come, we must depart hence. You shall repair with me to my place of abode, where I will order a change of apparel to be provided you. But of course," she instantaneously added, "it was an accident, and not an attempt at self-destruction."

"Madam, I promise not to betray you," observed Jocelyn, with earnest sincerity, "and if you would prefer that I should leave you this minute, so that I may not learn who you are, by proceeding with you to your own abode —"

"Your generosity is equal to your courage," answered the lady. "But if I am not interfering with your arrangements, you must come with me. I could not think of leaving

you thus dripping from head to foot; your hat, too, is gone. Besides, if I choose to conceal from you who and what I am, I shall have no difficulty in so doing, for I am now residing at Geneva in the utmost seclusion, with a false name, and under very peculiar circumstances," she added, in a voice which suddenly fell to tones of the lowest despondency. "However, it is probable that I may tell you my history, for after what you have done for me, I owe you all possible gratitude and confidence, — yes, and likewise the love which a sister bears toward a brother."

While thus conversing, the lady and Jocelyn walked together away from the lake in the direction of the town. They assuredly presented a somewhat singular appearance, both dripping, with nothing on their heads, and the lady's hair flowing in wet masses over her shoulders. But fortunately they encountered no one until they reached the nearest buildings, and then, as the lady immediately conducted our hero into a narrow and dark street, the few persons whom they did meet there took no particular notice of them.

In this manner they proceeded until they reached a gloomy-looking building, where a lamp was burning over the entrance. Here the lady pulled a bell, the sounds of which, as they met Jocelyn's ears, seemed as if emanating from some cloistral or cavern-like place. The door was almost immediately opened by an individual bearing a light, and Jocelyn at once recognized the gentleman with whom he had that afternoon dined at the adjacent village.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWO DOORS AT THE END OF THE PASSAGE

This recognition was mutual, and the lady at once noticed, with evident surprise, that her deliverer from the depths of Lake Leman was acquainted with the person who had just opened the door in obedience to her summons.

"You know Doctor Maravelli, then?" she immediately said, fixing her eyes upon our hero, and speaking in French.

"I had the pleasure of dining in his company to-day," answered Loftus, in the same language, "but I was not then acquainted with his name. Nor did I anticipate the pleasure of so soon meeting him again."

"It seems as if we were destined to be thrown in each other's way," said Maravelli, with a courteous smile, "and I at once accept that destiny by bidding you welcome to my house. If I did not give you an invitation hither when we parted this afternoon, it was through no disinclination — But, ah! you are both dripping wet. Yes, and hatless the one, without scarf and bonnet the other. Good heavens! all this denotes a splash in the lake — "

"An accident which befell me," the lady hastened to observe, "and to which I am indebted for the honour of this gentleman's acquaintance. Or, rather, I should say, I am indebted to him for my life, and you will admit, Doctor Maravelli, that I could not do otherwise than invite him hither to obtain such change of raiment as you may be enabled to afford?"

"Oh, for that matter no time shall be lost," exclaimed the doctor, "and not only change of raiment too, but a bed shall be cheerfully placed at your disposal, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Jocelyn.

Then, leading the way, he hastily summoned his housekeeper, Mavolta, to whose care the lady resigned herself, while he conducted Jocelyn up a wide but gloomy staircase, along a passage with an array of chamber doors on either side, and the aspect of which was precisely such as would be ascribed by a romance-writer to a house that was haunted. Opening one of the doors, the doctor showed Jocelyn into a bedchamber, handsomely furnished, but in a sombre style. The draperies were heavy, two or three large cupboards of a dark-stained wood filled up the recesses, and there was altogether an absence of that lightness, cheerfulness, and elegance, which usually combine as the attributes of sleeping-apartments in the city of Geneva.

Jocelyn did not, however, loiter to dwell particularly upon the features of the chamber, but hastened to divest himself of his own dripping apparel, and assume the entire change which Doctor Maravelli placed at his disposal. By the time he had thus shifted his raiment, the physician returned to conduct him down-stairs to a handsome dining-room, where a table was spread for supper.

"And now," said Doctor Maravelli, "you must inform me how this accident took place."

"You must know," answered Jocelyn, "that after we separated at the village, I was seduced by the loveliness of the evening to ramble again into the environs ere I came on to Geneva. But not noticing how time was slipping away, nor how far I was walking, I presently reached the border of the lake. In a few minutes I heard a heavy plunge, a splash, a gurgling sound — "

"Ah! I understand," said Maravelli. "My fair lodger, who is most romantically fond of twilight walks and moonlit rambles, was roving in that same direction when she fell in, eh? Some parts of the lake are dangerous enough for the incautious stroller during the obscurity. And so you had the good fortune to rescue her? Then you have not as yet taken up your quarters at any particular place in Geneva? "

"No," replied Loftus. "And now that I bethink me, my prolonged absence from the village inn must excite the strangest suspicions. The landlord will fancy some accident has occurred, or that I have purposely fled."

"I will despatch some one thither with any message you choose to send," said Maravelli. "Of course you will accept

of such hospitality as my humble dwelling can afford for this night?"

"I shall do so with gratitude," returned Jocelyn, "and if to-morrow you can help me to suitable lodgings you will add to the obligations under which I am already placed toward you. To speak plainly, I have business to transact of a somewhat delicate nature, and it accords with my purposes to remain in strict seclusion at Geneva for a day or two."

"Then you wish to find a quiet, retired lodging?" said Maravelli. "In fact, a place where you will be secure against the pryings of impertinent curiosity."

"Such is exactly my desire," returned Jocelyn. "I seek for the utmost privacy."

"Then it is possible," said Maravelli, in a musing tone, "that I myself can accommodate you. But I must see what Madame Roberts says upon the point, as I never take one lodger to the annoyance of another, and very seldom gentlemen at all."

"Ah! what of me?" exclaimed the lady whom Jocelyn had rescued from a watery grave, as she entered the room at the moment.

She had changed all her apparel, but was still dressed in half-mourning, with her hair now arranged in massive bands. She looked what may be termed interestingly handsome, for she was decidedly possessed of a very fine person and of striking features, although her cheeks were colourless and even sunken, and an expression of profound melancholy sat upon her countenance.

"I was just observing, madam," said Doctor Maravelli, as with the greatest respect he placed a chair for her, "that if you had no objection to this gentleman becoming a lodger in my house for a short time, a very short time —"

"Under any other circumstances than those which have this evening occurred," interrupted the lady, with a peculiar look and significant tone as she addressed herself to the doctor, "I should decidedly have objected to any such arrangement."

"Yes, Madame Roberts, I know it, I know it," Maravelli hastened to observe. "Under any other circumstances, no doubt; but as this gentleman was so providentially thrown in your way to snatch you from a watery grave, I think

that he may at once be regarded in the light of a friend, something more than a mere acquaintance, especially as he is a countryman of your own."

"This is precisely the view which I take of the matter," said the lady, who, it appeared, passed by the name of Madame Roberts, "and therefore, if this gentleman — But we are as yet strangers to each other by name," she added, with a mournful smile, "though already speaking of friendship."

"The name that figures upon my passport," said our hero, "is Jocelyn Loftus."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts, with a sudden start, and she surveyed our hero with evident surprise, curiosity, and interest.

"Is it possible this name is known to you?" asked Jocelyn, though not with any mistrust or alarm, for there was something in the lady's manner, language, and indeed her whole appearance, which convinced him that her own sorrows, whatever they might be, were of too deep and absorbing a character to permit her to harbour treacherous designs toward another, and there was altogether an air of genuine frankness and sincerity about her which placed Jocelyn quite at his ease on that head.

"Yes, the name of Jocelyn Loftus is indeed known to me," she answered, "and honourably so." Then turning to Doctor Maravelli, she said, "By all means, if you can accommodate this gentleman, do so. You have just heard that his name is known to me. I can assure you it is one that would not disgrace the interior of a palace."

It was now Jocelyn's turn to survey with astonishment, curiosity, and interest this lady who thus frankly and generously became a guarantee for his respectability, and who likewise spoke of him in such flattering terms. But she made a rapid sign to him, unperceived by Maravelli, to intimate that this was not the moment for further explanations, and he accordingly withdrew his inquiring looks and held back the verbal questions that were about to issue from his tongue. Almost at the same moment the door opened, and the doctor's housekeeper, Mavolta, entered, bearing a tray on which were served several dishes that sent forth a savoury perfume.

"And now, by the bye," said Maravelli, "relative to

this message which you desire to be sent to the village inn?"

"If it be understood that I am to take up my quarters at your house," answered Jocelyn, "let my baggage be fetched from the inn, the bill paid, and the post-chaise dismissed back to Chambery, where I hired it."

Thus speaking, Jocelyn produced money from his purse to defray the items alluded to, and Mavolta was at once charged with the duty of despatching a messenger to the village inn.

The physician, Mrs. Roberts, and Jocelyn now sat down to supper, and during the meal the conversation turned upon a variety of indifferent topics. The lady, though evidently oppressed by a profound sense of affliction, and also suffering from the exhausting influences of her two immersions in the water and all the excitement which had accompanied those attempts at self-destruction, nevertheless proved an agreeable companion. She strove to be cheerful, and as her conversational powers were by no means limited, she could not make such an effort without succeeding to a certain extent. As for Maravelli, he gave free scope to that garrulous propensity which he really possessed when apart from the considerations of business; and thus, altogether, Jocelyn spent by no means an unpleasant evening.

But still he was under the influence of no ordinary sentiment of curiosity. Who was this Madame or Mrs. Roberts, avowedly living under a feigned name at the house of the Genevese physician? His wife she assuredly was not, because if so, why should the fact be concealed? And his mistress she did not seem to be, inasmuch as he treated her with the utmost deference and respect instead of with familiarity. Indeed, her own deportment was such as to convince Jocelyn that she was really what was represented, namely, a lodger in Doctor Maravelli's house and a boarder at his table. But was it not a singular dwelling for a lady to choose? Whether married or a widow, there seemed something imprudent or suspicious in her fixing her residence beneath such a roof. And that she was a lady by birth, education, and social position, was beyond all doubt. That she had moved in the very best circles, too, was also apparent, for in the course of conversation she let slip a few allusions to personages of the highest rank in England, and with

whom she was evidently acquainted. Nor were these allusions made with the air of one who artfully and purposely suffers her brilliant connections thus to transpire, but whatever Mrs. Roberts said of this kind was given utterance to in all frankness and sincerity. Who, then, could she be, this lady who was surrounded by so much mystery?

Of course Jocelyn had not failed to observe how intent she was upon some inward woe, even while struggling to seem cheerful and to force herself to take a due share in the conversation. Her double attempt at suicide had indeed proven that the grief which she cherished was of the most poignant nature, and during the occasional pauses which occurred in the discourse, Jocelyn observed a sudden expression of ineffable anguish sweep over her features, and then be succeeded with so sinister a gloom that it was by no means difficult to understand that she experienced the goading sense of a deep wrong and cherished an implacable vengeance.

There was a suspicion which Jocelyn had formed concerning this lady from the very first moment he had dragged her forth from the water, for then, as her garments clung closely to her, her shape appeared to indicate that she was in the way to become a mother. But upon this idea the natural delicacy of our hero's feelings did not permit him to dwell, even in the deep recess of his own soul. At the same time, if this suspicion were correct, and if she were a widow, as her mourning garment led him to believe (although she wore not the widow's cap nor characteristic sleeve), then would the circumstance afford a clue to the reading of the mystery concerning her. Indeed, it would then even become almost intelligible enough, without waiting to hear the tale from her own lips, why she sought the retirement of a physician's house in a city so far removed from her native England.

When supper was over, Doctor Maravelli rose from the table and begged to apologize for a brief absence on the plea that he had a patient to visit. Jocelyn and Mrs. Roberts were accordingly left alone together.

"Madam," said our hero, now addressing the lady in English, after a brief silence which had followed the closing of the door behind Doctor Maravelli, "you will pardon me for seeking the earliest opportunity to revive the topic

which was engaging us ere now, — I mean relative to your knowledge of my name."

"I not only know the name of Jocelyn Loftus," said Mrs. Roberts, with a peculiar look, "but also that which is really your own."

"Ah!" ejaculated our hero, "then how is it that I am thus known to you?"

"Hush! we may not speak upon these matters now or here," interrupted the lady. "The doctor may return at any moment, or he may overhear us from some adjacent room, for this is a strange, rambling house, old-fashioned and tortuous in its arrangements as a feudal castle, and there is no knowing from what neighbouring apartment our host may listen to anything that is taking place in this."

"Then do you not think that he has really gone out?" inquired Jocelyn.

"I dare say he has," replied the lady, "but it is quite possible he may return sooner than we expect. He says that he does not understand English, but prudence forbids us from relying on that averment."

"Then will you, madam," asked Jocelyn, "give me an early opportunity of conversing with you alone, and in some place where we shall be free from interruption?"

"Yes, for I also wish to converse with you, and the sooner the better," said Mrs. Roberts. "I am acquainted with your object, I know your design, and if I can possibly forward it — But here am I doing precisely what I counselled you not to do, that is, talking on private matters."

"And yet what suspense shall I remain in until opportunity serves for the promised explanations!" said Jocelyn. "When can you favour me?"

"To-night, if you will," observed Mrs. Roberts, after a few moments' reflection. "We will meet when the house is quiet." Then, as if instantaneously understanding what an equivocal construction might be put upon this proposal, she hastened to observe, "I have no doubt you will be located in one of the rooms opening from the long passage on the first floor. At the end of that passage there is a drawing-room, looking on the garden at the back of the house. I will be there within half an hour from the time that the household retires to rest."

Jocelyn, who at once comprehended the delicacy which

prompted this arrangement, thanked the lady for the appointment so given, and promised to avail himself of it. They then talked upon indifferent matters, and in a few minutes Doctor Maravelli came back. Soon afterward Mrs. Roberts rose for the purpose of retiring to her own room, and when she had taken her departure, the doctor said to Jocelyn, "Now, without seeking in any way to penetrate into your affairs or your business at Geneva, permit me to observe that if I can forward your views or assist you in any way, I shall feel delighted to do so."

Our hero thanked the physician for this proposal, guardedly observing that if he required his succour he would avail himself of it. He then requested to be allowed to retire for the night, and he was accordingly conducted to the same bedroom where he had ere now changed his apparel.

His baggage had been duly fetched from the village inn, and was in the chamber allotted to him. He accordingly whiled away the time by taking out the things that he should require for his morning's toilet, until he thought it time to repair to the room indicated by Mrs. Roberts. She had said that she would be there half an hour after the household should have retired, and when the establishment was silent, but Heaven knows it had all along been silent as the tomb. Indeed, the silence of that house had something ominous and appalling in it. It seemed the silence of the dead. Though Jocelyn was in all the vigour of youth, with the fine, glowing intellect of earliest manhood, endowed with the loftiest courage and the noblest spirit, yet did he feel as if the interior aspect of that house, so sombre and so gloomy, was sufficient to damp his energies and fill him with melancholy forebodings. He thought of the passage outside, with its two arrays of doors, and he wondered if those rooms were tenanted by lodgers, or if they were left to dilapidation and decay. That they were for the most part unoccupied he felt convinced, not merely because he had neither seen nor heard of any lodger save Mrs. Roberts, but likewise because it was impossible that the house could be so still if there were so many inhabitants beneath its roof.

However, Jocelyn's reflections were cut short by the arrival of the moment when he deemed it fit to issue forth from his chamber and seek the drawing-room mentioned

by Mrs. Roberts. He opened the door noiselessly, took the candle in his hand, and proceeded stealthily along the passage. The boards creaked under his feet, the light threw strange shadows upon the wall, and Jocelyn felt, not as if he were threatened by any danger, but as if he were doing something that was wrong. It was a feeling of uneasiness perfectly intelligible and natural under the circumstances.

On reaching the end of the passage, he suddenly found himself placed in an awkward dilemma, for there were two doors fronting him, and he knew not which to choose. He examined both the doors carefully, in order to ascertain if a light glimmered through the keyhole of either; but no, all was darkness. He stooped down and peeped, he likewise listened at each keyhole, but darkness and silence seemed to reign within either apartment. What was he to do? Should he retrace his steps to his own chamber and return presently? Or had the lady been deceiving him? And now, for the first time, did it occur to Loftus that some treachery might be intended him. Yet how and what? No, it could not be. The lady had not thrown herself in his way to seduce him to that house. Their meeting had been purely accidental, and therefore was it unlikely indeed that chance had thus led him through such a train of circumstances into any net previously spread to enmesh him.

All these reflections passed rapidly through Jocelyn's mind in less than a minute, and reassured by the conclusion to which he came, he resolved upon pushing the present adventure to the end. He accordingly opened one of the doors at a venture, and walked into the room with which it communicated. No one was there, and Jocelyn was immediately about to retreat, when, perceiving a number of implements used in chemical pursuits, he was impelled by a feeling of curiosity to pause for an instant and take a closer survey of that apartment. It was not large, had no appearance of a drawing-room, and therefore could not be the one to which Mrs. Roberts had alluded. Indeed, it resembled an alchemist's study, save and except that the furnace inseparable from such a place was not there. A gloomy-looking apartment was it, with these implements of fantastic shapes scattered about, a huge volume, secured with dingy brazen clasps, lying on the floor, and large cupboards occupying the deep recesses, all serving to conjure up ideas of

those laboratories of the middle ages where sages pursued their researches deep into the night, patiently awaiting the happy moment (but a moment which never came) when the philosopher's stone should appear in precipitation at the bottom of a crucible, or the elixir of life should distil drop by drop from the lips of a retort.

Jocelyn was so struck by the appearance of this chamber that he forgot for the moment his appointment with Mrs. Roberts and all the other circumstances which had so recently been paramount in his mind. Indeed, he felt a strong inclination to open that massive volume and examine its contents, but the next instant he blushed with very shame at the bare idea of thus penetrating into the secrets which pertained to Doctor Maravelli, if secrets they indeed were.

But as he stood in the middle of that room, gazing around by the light of the candle which he held in his hand, he became aware of a powerful odour of spices which gradually stole upon his senses, and this was mingled with another smell, of a far different character, and which seemed to be that of death. It was strange how these two odours struck simultaneously, and yet so distinctly and differently, upon the olfactory nerve, but so it was, and the notion of something embalmed speedily forced itself upon Jocelyn's imagination.

It was now quite mechanically, indeed, altogether in an unpremeditated way, that Loftus opened one of the cupboard doors which stood ajar. But, heavens! how sudden and convulsive was the start which he gave as two rows of human heads bristled up before his view. Yes, there they were, two ranges of human heads, looking out at him with fixed and glassy gaze from the recesses of that cupboard. But our hero's terror was only momentary. Hideous and shocking as the spectacle might be, he was not a child to be terrified by it; he recoiled in horror, but he trembled not with alarm. On the contrary, he now inspected those heads more closely, and he found that, being embalmed, they were, as he suspected, the sources of the blended odours which had struck so powerfully on his sense. But he also observed that the shaven crowns were delicately marked with a number of lines, dividing the surface of the cranium into several sections, each section being distinguished by a figure. In-

side the cupboard door was pasted a paper of references, and Jocelyn speedily understood that the use of those embalmed heads was for the study of phrenology or craniology, in pursuance of the systems of Gall and Spurzheim, at that time engaging the attention of many learned and scientific men in Europe.

A person of Jocelyn's good sense could not, of course, feel any antipathy toward Doctor Maravelli for having in his possession these accessories to a most interesting study. On the contrary, his good opinion of the physician as an intellectual man was considerably enhanced, and again did he long to peer into that book which was so well secured with the great brazen clasps. But no, he would not thus violate the sanctity of a volume which might be in manuscript and not in print, and therefore doubly sacred. Indeed, he began to feel that he was guilty of an offence in even lingering in this chamber upon the mysteries of which he had intruded. But then, he had not found the door locked, and it was therefore evident, or at least might be presumed, that Doctor Maravelli did not consider the place as the depository of any important secrets, however well furnished it might be with curiosities.

Issuing forth from this chamber and closing the door carefully behind him, Jocelyn proceeded to the other door facing the passage, and without hesitation he at once tried it. It opened, revealing an inner door covered with scarlet cloth. This our hero likewise pushed open, and now he found himself in a drawing-room where a lamp was burning upon the table, and Mrs. Roberts was pacing to and fro, apparently in a very agitated manner.

" Pardon me, madam, I am afraid I have kept you waiting," said Jocelyn, as, closing the two doors, he advanced into the spacious room, which, though well furnished, partook of that same sombre aspect that characterized the entire establishment. " The truth is, I mistook the apartment. Not perceiving a light glimmering through the keyhole or underneath the door — "

" Because of this inner door," observed the lady. " I forgot to tell you, in the hurry of our discourse ere now, which door it was at the end of the passage that communicated with the drawing-room. The other, I believe, is the doctor's lumber-room, for his chemical apparatus. I once

peeped in, but not liking the appearance, did not cross the threshold."

"For my own part," observed Jocelyn, "I cannot help wondering that you find courage enough to live in this gloomy abode."

"Courage, indeed!" said Mrs. Roberts, bitterly, "had you not a pretty specimen of my cowardice this evening?"

"Pardon me for making an observation so indiscreet, so improper," interrupted Jocelyn. "Believe me, madam, I would not for the world aggravate your sorrow. It is, beyond doubt, already too great for you to endure. No, not for worlds would I enhance it," he added, with that generous vehemence which showed that the assurance came gushing up from the recesses of his heart.

"I believe you, I believe you, Mr. Loftus," said the lady, extending her hand toward him. Then, with a peculiar smile suddenly appearing upon her countenance, she said, "I suppose that I am to call you Mr. Loftus?"

"Yes, if you please," was the quick response. "That other name, I believe that I have renounced it for ever — But no matter, I await in anxiety any explanations you may have to give me."

"Mr. Loftus," resumed the lady, motioning him to take a seat, and placing herself in a chair at a little distance from the one which he took, "in the first place, I must speak about myself. After what has occurred this evening you have a right to know something about me. Nay, do not interrupt me; I know full well what you would say. You would tell me that the service you have rendered me forms not in your estimation any claim upon my confidence. But I think otherwise. At all events, I feel as if Heaven itself threw you in my way. I cannot fancy that it was a mere accident, one of the common incidents of life, which thus brought us together. I therefore feel a desire, so to speak, a craving, a longing, to tell you somewhat of my own history. It seems to me as if it would be a solace and a consolation thus to unburden myself partially to you. Nor will there be anything indiscreet or improper in this, for although you are so young a man, and I am not so very much farther advanced in years," she observed, with a melancholy smile, "yet do circumstances cause us to stand in the light of friends, so that the confidence which I may impart and you receive

will be such as a sister may communicate to a brother. Tell me, then, Mr. Loftus, tell me," she added, in a tone and with a look of the most mournful entreaty, indeed, of pathetic supplication, " will you permit me to speak of my sorrows and of my wrongs in your hearing? "

" Assuredly, most assuredly, if it will in the slightest degree soothe your afflictions," and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he surveyed with a boundless compassion that lady who thus plaintively addressed him.

" And yet mine is but a common history, after all," she exclaimed, starting from her seat in a state of considerable excitement. " It is the usual history of woman, — that is to say, of the woman who is weak enough and foolish enough to forget her duty and place confidence in the protestations of deceitful man. Oh, Mr. Loftus, such has been my case. I have already told you that the name which I bear beneath this roof is a false one; I shall not now tell you what my real one is. On a future occasion perhaps I may do so, or accident may reveal it to you. But no matter. You see that I am a lady by education, and I trust in manners. Such indeed is my social rank, such also is my title in our own native land. I have been married, but am a widow. In an evil hour I listened to the tale of love which a nobleman, handsome, elegant, and fascinating, breathed in my ears. He was married, and I therefore knew that he could not love me honourably. But, oh, Mr. Loftus, I listened to the dictates of my heart in preference to those of reason. In the tide of passion all prudence and propriety were swallowed up. Several strange and romantic circumstances combined to precipitate my fall. But on these I need not dwell. Suffice it to say that I did fall, and that no sooner had I surrendered myself to him who vowed that he loved me, than he abruptly and precipitately quitted England. It is true that he sent me a note protesting his sorrow and anguish at this departure, which, as he alleged, an imperious necessity enforced, but he therein declared that he knew not how long his absence might last, certainly for some weeks, perhaps for many months. Altogether, the style was so laconic, so strange, and so unsatisfactory, if not positively chilling, that I was filled with despair. I saw that I had been cheated, deluded, deceived, by a base profligate, that I had been treated as one of those unfortunate creatures

whom men take as the companions of a transitory enjoyment and fleeting pleasure."

As she thus spoke in accents full of concentrated bitterness, the unfortunate lady covered her face with her hands, and the next moment Jocelyn could perceive the tears trickling between her fingers. He sympathized deeply with her, but what could he say, what could he do to console her? Hers was a grief which admitted of no solace from human lips, but if consolation could be offered to her at all, it must be from one of her own sex, between whom and herself the circumstances of etiquette and propriety interposed no formal barrier.

"On receiving that note," the lady at length resumed, having hastily wiped away her tears, "I was overwhelmed with despair. But reflection showed me that if I had thus been made the dupe of a heartless debauchee, I should at least strive to conceal my dishonour from the world. To give way to utter despondency or frantic grief would only be to excite suspicion, which might lead on to exposure. I accordingly resolved to cherish my wrong in secret. But here I must suddenly digress for the purpose of informing you that it was at this very time I had an opportunity of hearing her Royal Highness, the Princess Charlotte of Wales, speak of you to her aunt the Princess Sophia. No matter under what circumstances I thus became an ear-witness to the discourse of those royal ladies. Suffice it to say that as they spoke somewhat unguardedly in my presence, enough fell from their lips, ere they recollected themselves, to make me acquainted with many particulars concerning yourself. If you wish me to tell you the exact truth, I must observe that the princesses spoke of you in the most enthusiastic terms, praising your chivalrous character, dwelling with grateful admiration on the enterprise in which you had embarked, and deploring the previous misfortunes and calamities in which you had been involved when imprisoned in Paris. Thus was it that the discourse of the two princesses not only revealed to my ears who you really were, but also impressed me with the highest opinion of your merits. Can you therefore wonder if I ere now spoke so confidently concerning your honour as an English gentleman, when recommending Doctor Maravelli to receive you as a lodger beneath his roof?"

"I thank you, madam," said Jocelyn, "for the flattering terms in which you speak of me. As for the object of my present visit to the city of Geneva, it is dictated by the illimitable compassion I experience for a much injured princess."

"Yes, I am no stranger," continued the lady, "to the mission which you have undertaken in respect to the unfortunate wife of the prince regent. I am likewise acquainted with the fact that you are the bearer of a letter from the Princess Sophia to her Royal Highness. But I am at a loss to understand," she suddenly exclaimed, "how it is that having quitted England in December on this mission, you are only now about to accomplish it, and yet it's the month of May."

"I have suffered fresh imprisonment and persecution in France," returned Loftus. "But on these heads I will give you full details anon. Meantime, madam, may I request you to proceed with your own history?"

"I now then take up the thread of the sorrowful narrative which regards myself," said Mrs. Roberts. "The abrupt departure of my noble lover, his disgraceful abandonment of me within a few hours after I had given him the last and fondest proof of affection which it is in woman's power to bestow, was not the only calamity that my weakness and folly had entailed upon me. While I was endeavouring by the assumption of a calm demeanour to veil the sense of dishonour and of wrong that gnawed at my heart's core, the tongue of scandal was busy with my name. Insidious whisperings were circulated relative to me, and certain particulars, wherein the ludicrous was strangely blended with the romantic, were rumoured relative to my amour. It now became necessary for me to withdraw from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move, for, alas! my reputation was undermined, even if it were not altogether destroyed. When a frail and erring woman, Mr. Loftus, is placed under the ban of society, it is not her guilt that is punished, but her want of cunning and tact in concealing it. The Spartan children in ancient times were not chastised for stealing, but for their clumsiness in not being able to conceal their thefts, and thus is it with regard to the frailty of ladies in fashionable life. But I will not pause to moralize upon the point, nor do I seek in what I have said a justifi-

cation or an excuse for my own errors. No, I have fallen, and I am punished for my fall. Forced to withdraw, as I have said, from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move, I came upon the Continent. This was in January last, and I took up my abode in Paris, where for some weeks I dwelt in seclusion. A faithful female friend in London, with whom I corresponded, informed me from time to time that my noble lover — should I not rather say destroyer of my peace? — was reported to be still upon the Continent. Suddenly an idea struck me, and I marvelled that it had not entered my mind before. What if I were to seek him, endeavour to bring him back to my arms, make him atone for the wrong he had done me by the present tenderness and future constancy of his behaviour toward me? I longed to seek him for this purpose. But my pride stood in the way. As a woman I had been wronged, as a woman I craved for revenge. Revenge? no, not if he would love me still. A few more weeks passed, and at length I found — oh, how can I confess the humiliating truth to you, Mr. Loftus? But still it must be told, and that truth is, I became painfully aware that my dishonour would bear its fruit, that I was in the way to become a mother."

Mrs. Roberts averted her head while she made this avowal in low and tremulous accents; then, with a profound sigh, she became suddenly silent. Jocelyn felt all the awkwardness of their relative position, — he, a young man, alone at that midnight hour with her, a young woman, and she making these strange and painful revealings to his ears, while he experienced for her a sympathy and a compassion to which, however, he knew not how to give expression. For when a woman, young and handsome, is not only frail, but makes an avowal of her frailty, the words of sympathy which a generous-hearted young man, himself young and handsome, would utter might so easily be construed into advances of a tender and improper character. It might even be supposed that he was taking advantage of that very weakness which the frail one avowed, in order to obtain the gratification of his own selfish desires. Jocelyn, noble-hearted as he was generous and high-minded, was nevertheless man of the world enough to appreciate alike the delicacy and the awkwardness of his position, in the light which we have just been pointing it out. Thus was it that he forbore from

giving expression to the sympathy which he in reality experienced toward this wronged and afflicted lady.

"When I could no longer conceal from myself this truth which I have just avowed," she proceeded, at length, but still with half-averted countenance, on which the blood mantled and then fled as abruptly again beneath the olive hue of her complexion, " I resolved to seek him who is the father of the babe which I bear in my bosom. All hesitation vanished; my mind was made up. Thinking no more of revenge, but only of love and tenderness, I took my departure from Paris. This was in the beginning of March, and I proceeded into Germany. Being rich, Mr. Loftus, although you find me living in this close seclusion now, I had ample means to enable me to prosecute the search which I had undertaken. It was a search after a lover, and I had resolved, if I succeeded in finding him, I would say, ' Return not to your own home in England; renounce it, abandon it, for my sake. Was it not your own proposition at the time of my fall that I should dare public opinion to become your mistress openly? Now, then, do I call upon you to accept me in that light. It will cost you no pang to desert a wife whom you do not love for a mistress whom you have declared you adore. And, behold! I will place my fortune at your feet; all that I possess shall be yours. There is no sacrifice that I am not prepared to make for you, so that when my as yet unborn infant comes into the world it may at least be received in the arms of a father.' In the hope of finding him to whom I might thus address myself, did I travel throughout Germany, but I could obtain no trace of him. I passed into Italy. It was now the beginning of April, and at Milan I succeeded in hearing tidings of an individual exactly answering his description, but passing under a false name. Several months, I learned, had elapsed since he was there, and on prosecuting my inquiries I discovered, beyond all possibility of mistake, that he was sedulously pursuing a rival with his addresses. Yes, he had been seen by domestics belonging to the hotel at which he resided — But wherefore need I enter into these particulars? Suffice it to say that I obtained the fullest proof of his infidelity, but, following up the clue, I came on to Geneva. A fortnight only has elapsed since I arrived in this city, where, if additional evidence were wanting I discovered enough to convince me that instead of

abandoning myself to dreams of hope and love, 'tis for me to think either of despair or of vengeance. The unsettled state of France and Germany, in consequence of the return of Napoleon from Elba, has determined me to fix my abode for the present at Geneva. Here at least does tranquillity continue, and it does not appear probable that the peace of the little republic will be disturbed, no matter what turn events may take in the north of Europe. I must inform you that on arriving at Geneva a fortnight ago, and on discovering those additional proofs of my noble lover's infidelity to which I have alluded, I was seized with so sudden and alarming an illness that it became necessary to summon medical aid. Doctor Maravelli was sent for, and of course he perceived my condition. To him did I make known my intention of remaining at Geneva, and I revealed to him enough of my history to enable him to understand that I sought seclusion for a few months while passing through the crowning ordeal of my disgrace. Accident had thus thrown me in the way of the very man who could provide me with the accommodation I required, for it appears that the doctor's house is one of retirement for ladies to whom such temporary seclusion becomes a matter of convenience or necessity. His chief patronesses, or, rather, patients, are foreign ladies who come hither from different parts, and even from distant quarters of Europe, to conceal their shame and endure its consequences beneath his roof. Now may you understand, Mr. Loftus, wherefore you find me in such a place. You can likewise comprehend why the doctor appealed to me for my consent ere he departed from the usual routine of his household arrangements by receiving you as a lodger. Had there been other ladies dwelling here at the present time, he would not perhaps have offered thus to accommodate you, but I am at this moment the only unhappy being of my sex located under such circumstances within these gloomy walls."

Again Mrs. Roberts paused, and for upwards of a minute she preserved a deep silence, broken only by the sighs which convulsed her bosom.

" With regard to that incident, that dreadful incident," she resumed, " which made us acquainted this evening, and has rendered me indebted to you for my life, that most wretched life which you so nobly rescued, oh, it was in a

sudden paroxysm of despair that I sought death in the deep waters of Lake Leman. I had rambled forth to escape from the fearful dulness and awful monotony of this house, and while roving on the shores of Geneva's inland sea, I fell into a train of meditation more harrowing, more goading, more poignant than any to which I had lately yielded. I thought of what I once was and what I now am, how but a few months back I occupied an honourable, almost a brilliant position, and how I am now a lonely, friendless sojourner in a foreign clime. I thought of my wrongs, how much I had loved that man, how cruelly I had been deceived. But, worst of all, I reflected that in a few months more I should give birth to a child on whom I could bestow no mother's fostering care, but whom, if it lived, I should have to abandon to the care of strangers, and that amongst those strangers must it be reared, never to know a parent's fondness nor endearing love. Oh, Mr. Loftus, naturally do I possess a good heart, a kind, loving, and affectionate disposition, and it was not, therefore, without emotion that I could contemplate the necessity of tearing myself away from the child who in a short time will see the light. It was this reflection that drove me to despair. Madness was in my brain, I felt as if I myself were an outcast, and that a curse would be entailed upon the head of my child if I suffered it to come into the world. Frantic, frenzied, banished, as it were, by the horror of my thoughts from the realms of hope, I resolved to put an end to my own wretched existence and terminate that of my yet unborn babe at the same time. But mine hour was not yet come. Providence interposed to save me, and you, my generous deliverer, were made the instrument of Heaven's merciful and inscrutable purpose."

The lady ceased, and, covering her face with her hands, again she wept, and again was there a long interval of silence.

"You are now acquainted with as much as it is needful for you to know of my sad history," she said, at length breaking silence after a much longer pause than any previous one. "I would offer to assist you in the generous enterprise which you have in view, but I know not whether there be any way in which I can forward your aims."

Jocelyn, after thanking Mrs. Roberts for the proffer of assistance which she had just given, proceeded to describe in a brief manner the circumstances of his late imprison-

ment, thus accounting for the long delay which had occurred since he set out from England on his present mission, and without mentioning any names, he observed that the princess was so surrounded by secret enemies and spies that he knew not how to obtain access to her.

"Can you not boldly present yourself at the villa to-morrow," asked Mrs. Roberts, "and demand an interview with her Royal Highness?"

"There are certain ladies in her household," returned Jocelyn, "who would hesitate at no means, however desperate, base, or unprincipled, in order to prevent me from obtaining access to her Royal Highness."

"Who are those ladies?" inquired Mrs. Roberts, hastily, and as if prompted by a particular motive.

"Their name is Owen, and there are three sisters," was the response.

"Detested name!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts. Then, in a different tone, she added, "I have every reason to believe that one of those young ladies of whom you have spoken is no very estimable pattern of morality and virtue, though Heaven knows it is not for me to cast the first stone at her. But I should inform you, unless, indeed, you know it already, that the strangest, the most startling, indeed, the most astounding rumours are prevalent in Geneva relative to her Royal Highness."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Loftus. Then, as a sudden recollection struck him, he said, "I remember how peculiar and how mysterious was Maravelli's manner when I spoke to him on this same point at the village inn where we dined together this afternoon."

"Doctor Maravelli is acquainted with something relative to the villa, of a dark and mysterious character," observed Mrs. Roberts. "He has once or twice inadvertently let fall a hint to this effect, and although naturally a very cautious man, yet has he so far committed himself on one or two occasions as to suffer me to perceive that he could reveal some startling secret if he chose."

"But concerning whom, and of what nature is that secret?" asked Loftus, eagerly.

"Ah! that I cannot say. Doctor Maravelli has never entered into particulars, has never even manifested the slightest approach toward making me his confidante.

Besides," added the lady, with dignity, " I should not think of encouraging a confidence calculated to place us on so familiar and intimate a footing. No, he has merely let slip a word or two in an unguarded moment, but enough, I repeat, to make me aware that he is acquainted with some secret which he could reveal if he chose."

" But the reports relative to the princess," said Jocelyn, inquiringly, " what is their nature? "

" All kinds of incredible things," replied Mrs. Roberts. " Indeed, I would not repeat them were it not absolutely necessary that you should know all that is said concerning her, and were it not also that you would be enabled to glean these things from other sources, for they are on the tip of every tongue, and scandal is busy enough with the princess's name. In a word, 'tis said that she not only intrigues openly and unblushingly with her equerry Bergami, but that she scruples not to receive other lovers inside the walls of the villa; ay, and 'tis added, too, that she has even given birth to a child."

" Heavens! is this possible? " exclaimed Jocelyn, starting with mingled amazement and indignation. " What am I to think? Have I indeed embarked in the cause of a shameless wanton, and thus laid myself open to become the laughing-stock of the whole world, or is slander doing its detestable work? "

" Firmly and sincerely do I believe in the latter hypothesis," returned Mrs. Roberts. " Nevertheless, the whole affair is full of mystery. That one of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen has admitted a lover " — and here the lady sighed deeply — " within the precincts of the villa, I have every reason to believe; and that therefore such conduct is but too well calculated to bring scandal upon that dwelling, a scandal, indeed, which by misapprehension and mistake may attach itself to the princess herself, while it is all along only one of her dependents who is to blame — "

" Good God! " ejaculated Loftus, starting from his seat as if a flash of lightning suddenly thrilled through him from head to foot, " I understand it all. 'Tis the diabolical working-out of the conspiracy. Yes, yes, the truth stands revealed before me plain and transparent as it possibly can be. Madam," he abruptly exclaimed, turning toward

Mrs. Roberts, "the construction you have so charitably placed upon the matter is the right one, and I solemnly assure you that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales is innocent of all and everything that scandal may impute unto her."

Mrs. Roberts gazed upon our hero with mingled astonishment and delight. Indeed, she forgot her own wrongs and her own sorrows in her joy to think that the injured wife of the prince regent not only possessed a champion who embraced her cause so fervently, but who was enabled to vindicate her character so confidently.

"Madam," said Loftus, observing the manner with which she surveyed him, "you have to a certain extent imparted your afflictions to me, and I will in return make known certain secrets to you. You have heard me speak of a conspiracy. I will explain what I mean, for I believe, from certain things which you have said, that you can assist me in the task I have in hand, and I feel assured that you possess the inclination to do so."

Jocelyn then proceeded to reveal all that he knew concerning the conspiracy on foot against the princess, and of which the three Misses Owen were the instruments. Mrs. Roberts listened with surprise and indignation, but when our hero had concluded, she said, with a peculiar emphasis, "After all, I am not astonished to hear that the Queen of England is one of the prime movers of this diabolical wickedness. I have all along suspected that she was capable of any treachery, any cruelty — "

But here Mrs. Roberts checked herself, and Loftus had too much delicacy to put any questions to her as to the opportunities she might have had of judging so minutely relative to the secret disposition of old Queen Charlotte.

For half an hour longer did the conversation last between Jocelyn and the lady, and it was past one o'clock when they quitted the drawing-room to return to their respective chambers.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DOCTOR'S SECRET

On the following morning Mrs. Roberts took her breakfast in her own room, she being much exhausted with the incidents of the preceding evening, and also on account of the late hour to which she had sat up. Loftus and Doctor Maravelli were accordingly alone together at table, and when the meal was over, our hero said to the physician, "I wish to have some conversation with you on a subject of a very delicate nature and of the utmost importance."

"With much pleasure," said the doctor, evidently not altogether unprepared for this intimation, especially after the hint which he had given Loftus on the preceding evening, to the effect that if he could be of any service to him his aid should be cheerfully afforded. "Come with me into my sanctum, where we can talk at greater ease, because secure against interruption."

He thereupon led the way into that little parlour which has been before described as fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funereal appearance.

"Now, Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "I wish to treat you as a man of the world, and therefore I will at once frankly and candidly inform you that I believe you have it in your power to render me a service for which I am able and willing to pay handsomely. You must not imagine that because I am travelling humbly, unattended, and without any circumstance of pomp or show, that I am limited in my means, for even if my own resources did not enable me to do what is necessary in the carrying out of my plans, I should not find much difficulty in obtaining from other quarters the supplies needful for the purpose."

"And what is this service that you think I can render

you? " asked Maravelli, inwardly chuckling at the preface with which our hero had introduced his business, and which seemed to promise large gains for the unprincipled physician.

" In your capacity, doctor," resumed Loftus, who saw in the twinkling of Maravelli's eye the lurking devil which personifies the love of gold in the heart of man, " you must frequently be called upon to exercise your professional skill under circumstances of great secrecy, and no doubt in proportion to the importance of the secret is the fee placed in your hands? "

" I believe that all professional men are occasionally placed in such circumstances," remarked the doctor, with a mysterious look.

" But you especially, within the walls of Geneva," said Jocelyn, " considering that you have this spacious establishment fitted up expressly for the accommodation of ladies who seek temporary retirement. The circumstance bespeaks you to be a man in whom confidence is placed, and therefore if ever there be a secret which can be hushed up at home, without the frail one being compelled to seclude herself for awhile within these walls, you doubtless, of all the medical men in Geneva, are the one to be confided in under such circumstances? "

" You seem to understand my repute and my business well," said Maravelli, with a smile of still deeper meaning than before. " Now, there is something uppermost in your mind, to which all this is but a mere preface. Speak candidly at once. I think that we shall soon understand each other."

" Then, in plain terms," said Jocelyn, " if you will tell me what is the best-paid secret which has recently been entrusted to you, I will give you double or treble the amount for the revelation."

" Gently," said the doctor. " Again I may observe that I think we shall understand each other, but for me to reveal to you any secret at random will not do. I have several secrets, secrets regarding the happiness and deeply compromising the honour of divers noble families, Genevese, German, French, Italian, English, all which secrets are now locked up in my breast, and the very one which I may consider most important might not be that which has the same value in your eyes. Besides, you are not asking through

mere curiosity; you have a motive, and consequently there is one particular secret which you wish to know. Give me a clue."

"Did not our conversation yesterday afford you any insight with regard to my business at Geneva?" asked Jocelyn.

"Candidly speaking," replied Maravelli, "methought that you were somewhat pressing in your queries in regard to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales."

"Yes, and methought that you were likewise somewhat mysterious, I may say even peculiar, in the answers that you gave me."

"In what manner?" asked Maravelli.

"You surely can recollect what took place between us," rejoined Jocelyn. "You have spoken, as you informed me, on one occasion to two of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen; you also left upon my mind the impression that you had been within the walls of the villa; and your look intimated as plainly as the most eloquent looks are able that you could state something if you chose which would soon put to flight all the elevated notions which I might have formed relative to the honour of the Princess of Wales. Tell me, did I read aright what was passing in your mind?"

"Yes, to a certain extent," answered Maravelli, but hesitatingly and guardedly.

"Now, it is my habit," resumed Jocelyn, "when having any particular clue to follow up through paths enveloped in gloom and beset with doubts and mysteries, to observe the minutest circumstances that may assist my investigation; or, in plainer terms, by putting two and two together I seldom fail at arriving at an accurate conclusion. Now that you, Doctor Maravelli, are acquainted with some secret connected with the villa where the princess resides, I am convinced. Then, when I find rumour declaring in bold and unmistakable terms that her Royal Highness has been guilty of great profligacies, and even privately given birth to a child, I ask myself, who could confirm this tale if not Doctor Maravelli?"

Jocelyn looked steadily in the physician's face as he thus spoke, and again did he perceive that sinister twinkling in the eyes of the Genevese which denoted the heart's lust for

gold. This very look at once served as a hint, although it was in reality the natural peeping forth of the man's character rather than an intentional development of it on his part. Jocelyn, however, at once profited thereby, and producing a pocketbook, he counted down Piedmont bank-notes to the value of two hundred louis d'or.

"You will not be offended with me, sir," he remarked, endeavouring to do the business in as delicate a way as possible, "if I offer this earnest of my liberal intentions toward you."

"I cannot feel offended, no, I cannot possibly be angry at such generosity," mumbled the physician. "But, I ought not, really I ought not — that is, I don't think — But, however, I suppose that we do understand each other now," and thus speaking, the physician consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, with the evident lust of one who is satisfying the strong craving of an insatiate passion. "That is just double the fee that I received from Mrs. Ranger," he thought within himself. Then, fixing his eyes upon Jocelyn, he said, "It is indeed too true that her Royal Highness the English princess became a mother a short time ago, barely three weeks, for I myself brought her child, which was still-born, into the world."

Loftus was staggered, and for a moment he certainly lost all faith in the possibility of the princess's virtue, for this intelligence on the doctor's part was given with an assurance, a sincerity, and a solemnity that put his truthfulness almost beyond a doubt. But still Jocelyn had resolved to sift the matter to the very bottom, and, veiling his emotions accordingly, he said, "Will you now explain to me all the circumstances under which this startling occurrence took place?"

Maravelli accordingly narrated to our hero those circumstances which are already known to the reader: how his services had been secured in advance by a liberal payment, how, when the night came, he had been conducted blindfolded to the place, how he was led up into a room where a lamp burned dimly and feebly, draperies were carefully drawn over the window and around the bed, and his patient's head was completely enveloped in the folds of a thick black veil, how he had delivered this female of a still-born child, and how two young ladies, whom he had since recognized

as two of the Misses Owen, had saluted the patient as "dearest and beloved princess." He likewise added how, on issuing forth again, he had been left in the garden by Mrs. Ranger, and how he had heard the tread of footsteps, the sounds of voices, and the galloping off of a post-chaise, which, filling him with terror, made him scale the wall and speed back to his own house.

"Then I am to understand, Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "that you raised the bandage and took a peep about the room to which you were so mysteriously introduced?"

"It is as you say," answered the physician. "Human nature could not have remained proof against such a temptation to gratify one's curiosity under such peculiar circumstances."

"But you did not all along obtain the slightest glimpse of the countenance of the lady occupying the bed, your patient, in a word?"

"No, I beheld not her countenance," was the reply.

"But you are sure that the two young ladies who entered and saluted her as the princess were two of the Misses Owen?"

"Yes, I am certain of it. From beneath the bandage I observed them sufficiently to know them again, and since then I have seen them walking upon the banks of the lake in attendance upon the princess. I have even had the curiosity to ascertain their Christian names, and found that they were Miss Emma and Miss Julia."

"Well, and you also discovered that the female who managed all this mysterious business was a certain Mrs. Ranger?"

"Yes," returned Maravelli. "Her also did I observe in the room, and if you see her once it would be impossible not to know her again."

"One question more," said Jocelyn. "After all the precautions which were taken, or seemed to be taken, to prevent you from ascertaining that it was the princess's villa, you were nevertheless suffered, when issuing forth again, to quit the garden by yourself? In plain terms, Mrs. Ranger left you, on the plea of looking after another woman to whom she had entrusted the dead child, and thus you were left alone to discover where it was you really were?"

"Yes," observed Maravelli. "But that part of the business belonged, as it were, to another adventure."

"And that other adventure?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly. "Be pleased to tell me everything connected with the incidents of that night. In proportion to your candour shall my liberality be measured."

"I can really tell you little enough that is satisfactory on this head," replied Maravelli. "But listen attentively, Mr. Loftus. You must know that, being wedded to science, I from time to time purchase any human fish which two or three rogues belonging to the city hook up from the lake. I may add that I possess a sort of agency to supply certain German universities with heads for phrenological study, real heads, you must understand, and not chalk ones, but heads which I embalm according to a valuable secret of my own. Well, Mr. Loftus — But I see you are looking at me with a strange expression."

"Pray pardon me, and proceed," said our hero, who indeed had looked confused on being spoken to relative to those very heads whereof he had seen several specimens in the doctor's private room during the previous night.

"Well, I merely mentioned those little facts," continued Maravelli, "in order to explain how it happens that I have any acquaintance at all with three such villainous ruffians as Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden, for those are the fishers of men to whom I alluded, and they are likewise fellows ever ready to do whatsoever service is well paid, no matter for its nature. These men, then, it appears from what they have since told me during a conversation I had with them, were hired by two English gentlemen named Smith and Thompson to carry off a couple of ladies from the villa on the very night of which I have been speaking, and that same night, you understand, on which my services were put in requisition. But it would appear that Kobolt and his comrades carried off the wrong females, — indeed, none others than Mrs. Ranger and the very woman having charge of the dead child. Hence the sudden disappearance of Mrs. Ranger when she left me in the garden in the manner I have described. The two Englishmen, it appears, had gone to Lausanne, and there a ludicrous scene took place when the two elderly dames were brought into their presence."

"But how know you that the other woman taken with

Mrs. Ranger was the one to whom the child had been entrusted? Because those men — Kobolt, and the others of whom you speak — could not have known all this."

"No, assuredly not," returned Maravelli, "but Mrs. Ranger called upon me a few evenings after the incidents that had taken place, and hinted to me what had occurred on the memorable occasion in question. She said that as now I of course knew it was the princess's villa to which I had been taken, she had only to add her prayers and entreaties to any other inducement which I had already received to keep the secret, as I must now be more than ever aware of its immense importance."

"Did Mrs. Ranger happen to mention the name of that woman of whom you have been speaking?" asked Jocelyn.

"Yes, she said it was Hubbard, Mrs. Hubbard, the laundress in the household of her Royal Highness."

"And the two Englishmen who called themselves Smith and Thompson?" said Jocelyn, more than half-suspecting that these very convenient names were only assumed ones, but by whom and for what purpose he of course could not imagine. "Did you ever see them?"

"Not to my knowledge," returned Maravelli.

"And about the still-born child," asked Jocelyn, "what became of it?"

"Ah! that question reminds me," exclaimed the doctor, "that there is another little incident growing out of the adventures of that night, an incident which has come to my knowledge by a side-wind, and which may probably account for the manner wherein the infant corpse was disposed of."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Jocelyn, "your budget of information is even more capacious than I had expected. I am sure you have already given me two hundred louis' worth of intelligence. Here is another hundred louis, therefore, for what you are about to impart to me."

"Upon my word, you justify the opinion so invariably entertained relative to the generosity of Englishmen," said Maravelli, as he took up the bank-notes which Jocelyn had just counted down upon the table, and having consigned them to his pocket, he continued to observe, "Mr. Loftus, I am still speaking of the night of memorable incidents,

and here is another episode in that night's history. Behold, a young lady was arrested on the margin of the lake, between two and three o'clock in the morning, by a posse of police officers, who were lying in wait for the fishers of men, and who were suddenly alarmed by a splash in the water. The young lady was taken before the night-commissary, and to him she gave her name, Emma Owen. Her story was that she went out for a ramble, and that in a listless mood she flung a stone into the water. The magistrate ordered her to find bail. She accordingly sent for a linen-draper with whom she dealt, and he at once proceeded to the police station and entered into the required surety. He happens to be a cousin of mine, and hence my knowledge of the transaction. I now leave you to judge, Mr. Loftus, for yourself, what Miss Emma Owen was doing at the side of the lake within two or three hours after the accouchement, and what that splash was which attracted the notice of the police officers."

"Will you favour me with the name and address of this linen-draper?" asked Loftus.

"Heavens! I hope we are not going to have any exposure in all these things," exclaimed Maravelli, now evidently frightened. "Remember that according to the laws of Geneva, it is branding with a red-hot iron and ten years' imprisonment for any surgeon who privately and secretly assists in the accouchement of a woman, and who fails to have the birth, place, hour, and all particulars duly registered. Besides, even if the authorities, out of consideration for a lady of the princess's royal rank, should pass the matter over in silence, yet, were it merely whispered that I had in any way betrayed the confidence reposed in me, I should lose all the patronage whereby I live, and I might shut up my establishment at once."

"Doctor Maravelli," said Jocelyn, who had listened with the utmost attention to these remonstrances, "rest assured that you shall not suffer on account of all this. I cannot explain to you my motives in penetrating into the affair, but you may be certain that no harm shall befall you. Now, then, the linen-draper's name, and here is another hundred louis."

"Oh, you are too good, you are too generous," said Maravelli, no longer thinking of the danger which had ere

now alarmed him, but consigning the notes to his pocket. "Here is the name," and he wrote it down upon a piece of paper.

"Now, one word more," said Jocelyn.

"Stop!" exclaimed Maravelli, as something struck him. "Without compromising me in the least, you might ascertain all the particulars of this little episode relating to Miss Emma Owen. The night-commissary must have duly made an entry thereof in the police book, which you can inspect for a franc. The whole series of adventures happened about three weeks ago."

"Thanks for this additional information," said Jocelyn. "And now the one word more that I alluded to. Where, in case of need, can I find these men, Kobolt and his companions, of whom you have been speaking?"

"If any time after dark you walk on the shores of the lake, near the old jetty, you will be pretty sure to encounter three ill-looking fellows; or if you particularly wish to see them in a more private manner, I can tell you the tavern which they are in the habit of frequenting."

At this moment a knock was heard at the room door, and Mavolta entered with the announcement that the doctor's presence was immediately required at a hotel much frequented by foreign visitors, especially the English. He thereupon sallied forth, and Jocelyn proceeded to his own chamber, where he sat down to pen a letter to his Louisa, and also to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue in consequence of the many important revelations he had just received from Doctor Maravelli.

In this manner he whiled away the time till midday, when he repaired to the drawing-room, Mrs. Roberts having given him to understand on the preceding night that she would be there at that hour. Nor did she now fail to keep the appointment, and he accordingly found her seated upon the sofa in that apartment.

A dead pallor sat upon the olive hue of her skin, making her seem as if she had recently been very ill. She also looked languid and weak, and it was but too evident that she had sustained a severe shock from the immersion in the water and the excitement she had undergone, in her delicate situation, on the preceding evening. She endeavoured, however, to smile cheerfully as she gave our hero

her hand, but he could not help saying, "I am afraid you are very ill?"

"I do indeed feel more severely to-day than I did last night the effects of my rash and wicked attempt at self-destruction," answered Mrs. Roberts, "but I shall be better to-morrow. I promised you last night that I would repair to-day to the villa, and endeavour to obtain an interview with her Royal Highness, but I am afraid I must postpone this visit until to-morrow, when I shall no doubt be better. Indeed, unless you are very impatient, I can faithfully promise you that to-morrow your letter shall be delivered to her Royal Highness."

"I could not think of pressing you to undertake a task for which you are evidently so unfitted to-day," said Jocelyn.

He then proceeded to inform Mrs. Roberts how he had succeeded in worming out of Doctor Maravelli so many important secrets connected with the villa, but when he mentioned the names of Mr. Thompson and Mr. Smith as those of the two Englishmen who had hired Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females to Lausanne, he noticed that Mrs. Roberts became much affected. She trembled violently and burst into tears. Then, remembering all she had said on the preceding night relative to her faithless lover and one of the Misses Owen, it instantaneously struck him that either Smith or Thompson was the feigned name under which that noble seducer of hers had travelled on the Continent.

"I see that you have divined what is passing in my thoughts," she said, gazing upon Jocelyn through her tears. "And now I can full well understand that it becomes important for you to ascertain all that you can relative to that intrigue between my faithless lover and Julia Owen."

"It is indeed of importance," said Jocelyn, "because from all that I told you last night it is probable that, faithful to the vile mission which they have received from the arch-conspirators in London, these Owens have managed to throw the guilt, the scandal, and the dishonour of their profligacy upon the princess. It is important, then, as you will see, madam, that I should glean every possible evidence to prove that profligacy on the part of either or all of those Misses Owen."

"You have nought to do, Mr. Loftus," said the lady,

" but repair to the town hall, examine the police book, and ascertain where the individual named Thompson lived when at Geneva. You can then follow up your inquiries at the place so indicated and perhaps you may glean much important information concerning him."

"And Mr. Smith the same?" said Jocelyn.

" Alas! I am in a position to tell you certain particulars relative to him," resumed the lady, with a profound sigh, " for he is the treacherous one of whom I have been speaking. Here, then, is the address of the lodging which he occupied when at Geneva. If you go to the house, you will be received by a young and beautiful girl, one of those models of true Genevese loveliness, but who, alas! is gradually becoming the mere wreck of her former self. That this sad change is taking place in her is but too evident, even to the eye of one who never saw her ere the blight of sorrow had fallen upon her cheeks. Did I not tell you last night," continued Mrs. Roberts, with a strong accentuation of bitterness, " that on pursuing my inquiries here, within the walls of Geneva, I learned enough to put to flight all dreams of love and hope, and make me think only of vengeance? For that treacherous one who scrupled not to make a moment's plaything and toy of me, and then tossed me ignominiously away, has done the same by this poor Genevese girl. Nay, his conduct has even been more flagitious toward her than in respect to myself, for I knew that he was married, and I fell, therefore, with my eyes open. Yes, mine was the guilt of sheer profligacy, and its punishment was merited. But that poor girl, placing full reliance upon the word of an Englishman, believed that he was unmarried; and little dreaming that he was of a lordly rank and so highly placed above her, she surrendered herself to his honour, but in the hope of becoming his wife. During the last month of his residence at Geneva, he was frequently absent from his lodging for the whole night, and though at first his excuses satisfied the girl, she at length grew jealous. So she followed him, kept a watch about the villa, and gleaned unmistakable proof that he was carrying on an intrigue with Miss Julia Owen. But still the poor Genevese girl said nothing to her seducer, for she was afraid of angering him, and she trembled lest he should seek some subterfuge for not fulfilling his pledge to her, — that pledge the fulfilment whereof she

stood so much in need to save her honour. But all on a sudden her seducer's precipitate departure from Geneva filled her with despair, and now, as I have ere now told you, Mr. Loftus, she is a sinking wreck, though still retaining all the evidences of remarkable beauty. But even in three weeks has affliction worked fearful inroads upon her. Ah! no wonder, for if my heart be nearly broken, experienced as I am in the ways of the world, what must be the feelings of this unhappy girl, so innocent, so full of gaiety and joy, until she became his prey!"

"Alas! poor girl!" said Jocelyn, deeply touched by this narrative. "You know my reasons for remaining indoors to-day, — indeed until the letter which I bear from England shall be safe in the hands of the princess?"

"You are afraid of being seen and recognized by any one attached to the household of her Royal Highness, the result of which knowledge of your presence in Geneva would only be to cause the multiplication of all imaginable precautions to ward off the approach of any friendly disposed person to the presence of the princess."

"Yes, those are the reasons which induce me to remain in the house to-day," said Jocelyn, "but to-night so soon as it is dusk, I will issue forth and institute the necessary inquiries relative to the individual who bore the name of Thompson."

"And you will also do well to call at the other lodging and see that poor girl," said Mrs. Roberts. "She may probably tell you even more than she told me concerning the villainy, the perfidy, and the profligacy of her seducer. But now that I bethink me," she suddenly exclaimed, "there can be no need for me to exhibit the slightest want of confidence toward you, since you have placed such full trust in me. I will therefore tell you my real name, likewise that of the perfidious nobleman who has been the author of my unhappiness and who under the name of Mr. Smith — "

But here Mrs. Roberts was interrupted by the entrance of Doctor Maravelli, who burst somewhat abruptly into the room, on his return from the visit to which he had been summoned.

"Now, my dear madam," he exclaimed, "you will have a companion at last. I thought it impossible that my establishment could remain much longer with only one

lady lodger. Another will be here presently, recommended to me also from the very same hotel where I had the honour of first forming your acquaintance. I have explained to her that I have a gentleman lodging in my house," added the doctor, turning toward Loftus as he thus spoke, "and she has made no objection."

"I am glad for your sake, madam," said our hero, addressing himself to Mrs. Roberts, "that you will thus have a companion."

"And a very agreeable one, too, I fancy," cried Doctor Maravelli. "She is a fellow countrywoman of yours, a thorough lady, beautiful in person, fascinating in manners, and with one of the sweetest voices I ever heard in my life."

"At all events, you are drawing a charming picture, doctor," said Mrs. Roberts, forcing herself to smile, for she never chose to appear too unhappy in Maravelli's presence.

"Perhaps you will have the kindness, my dear madam," continued the doctor, "to receive the lady when she comes. I think it always better that a stranger should be met in the first instance by one of her own sex, and that they should also be left alone together for a few hours, so that they may become well acquainted and get on a friendly kind of footing with each other. Perhaps, therefore, madam," he added, "you and Mrs. Montague — for that is the name the lady chooses to be known by — will pass the remainder of the day alone together in the drawing-room, while Mr. Loftus and I take our dinner and wine *tête-à-tête*, as we did yesterday, at the village inn."

The suggestions of Doctor Maravelli were at once agreed to, and Jocelyn was accordingly prevented for the remainder of that day from finding an opportunity of renewing his private conversation with Mrs. Roberts. The interval till dinner-time he passed in his own chamber, reading some books which the doctor lent him; and when at five in the evening he was summoned to the dining-room, he learned from the physician that Mrs. Montague had duly arrived, accompanied by her lady's-maid, in the course of the afternoon, and that she was with Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room.

Loftus sat an hour with the doctor at table, and then returned to his books to while away another three hours until it was dusk. This was at about nine o'clock, at which hour

he issued forth from Doctor Maravelli's establishment, to institute certain inquiries necessary for the carrying out of his mission with regard to the Princess of Wales.

In the meantime, and very shortly after Jocelyn had left Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room, in the forenoon, according to the suggestion of Doctor Maravelli, the new lodger, Mrs. Montague, arrived at the establishment and was received by the physician. She was accompanied by her lady's-maid, and was evidently of rank and distinction, as she was assuredly of great personal beauty. In none of these particulars had the doctor at all exaggerated.

Mavolta, being likewise in attendance, at once escorted Mrs. Montague to the drawing-room, but the moment she threw open the door and the eyes of the newcoming English lady encountered those of Mrs. Roberts, who had risen from her seat to receive her, each started with the suddenness of an amazed recognition. Mavolta did not observe what thus passed, but closing the door behind Mrs. Montague, left her and Mrs. Roberts alone together.

"Is it possible?" exclaimed one.

"And I also ask, is it possible?" cried the other.

Then there was a pause, a very awkward pause of upwards of a minute, during which the two ladies evidently knew not exactly what course to pursue toward each other. But at length Mrs. Roberts advanced, extending her hand, and saying, "We meet under circumstances that should quench all hostile feeling."

"Agreed," returned Mrs. Montague, and they shook hands accordingly.

But here we must leave them, for the present, to discuss their several grievances, compare notes of their plans, and, in a word, indulge in those reciprocal outpourings of confidence which were so natural with two females in their condition.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FISHERS OF MEN

Having engaged a fiacre, or vehicle answering in description to a London hackney-coach, Jocelyn proceeded in the first instance to the town hall, where he made inquiries relative to the lodging which a certain Mr. Thompson, an English gentleman, had occupied while recently sojourning in Geneva. It being what would be called in England "after office hours," our hero had to pay double fees for the search, to which he of course did not object, and in a few minutes the clerk in charge of the registry gave him a slip of paper containing the information which he required. But as he put the slip into Jocelyn's hand, the official asked, "Is this all you desire to know concerning Mr. Thompson?"

"I wish to ascertain all I can concerning him," replied Jocelyn, "and if you can give me any additional particulars, I shall most cheerfully and liberally remunerate you for your trouble."

Thus speaking, he laid two louis upon the table, and the clerk, after consigning them to his pocket, unlocked a cupboard, took out a bulky volume, and opening it at the letter T, searched for the name of Thompson.

"It appears to be a very common name with your fellow countrymen, sir," he remarked, with a smile, "for a large number of English visiting Geneva are called Thompson. I have observed, too, it is the same with Smith and Jones and Brown and Green and White, but I think that of all, the Smiths predominate."

"There is no doubt a great number of Englishmen bearing those names," said Loftus, "but it must also be observed that whenever an Englishman, no matter how fine a name his

real one may be, wishes to take a false one, he is sure to fix on the commonest and ugliest."

"Ah! indeed, is it so?" said the clerk, who, like all Genevese, was fond of a gossip. "Well, sometimes we find out that Englishmen visiting Geneva are travelling with false names, but so long as our attention is not openly and officially directed to the matter, we wink at it. The English, you see, sir, spend a great deal of money at Geneva. Their presence is good for our trade, and we like to encourage them here. They may therefore take what names they like, so long as they do not violate the laws. At the same time, I must inform you that all particulars we do succeed in gleaning concerning them we place on record, or else," he added, with a sly laugh, "we should not have such a police book as this to refer to when occasion may require. But, ah! here is the Thompson concerning whom you have been inquiring, the last Englishman of that name who has visited Geneva, and you will perceive that there is a pretty long note appended to his name."

Our hero looked at the place to which the official pointed and observed that there was indeed a lengthy annotation, consisting of such curt, broken, but very significant sentences as the following:

"Came from Italy — had been seen at Milan — supposed to be secretly following the English princess's retinue — is well provided with money — evidently has no political aim in view — has been recognized by an English traveller as a Colonel Malpas — said not to bear a very high character in his own country — lives secluded and retired here — shuns notice, avoids society, pays his way regularly — goes out at night — lurks about the English princess's villa — has been seen to scale the wall — was watched on two or three occasions — found to have passed the night within the villa — orders given not to molest him — no desire to create a scandal — departed suddenly — left no debts unpaid."

"And that is all," said the clerk, when he had read these notes over to our hero.

Loftus then requested to be favoured with any private information that the book might afford relative to a Mr. Smith who had also been recently staying at Geneva, and having paid another fee, he was allowed to inspect the following record:

"Came from Italy, through Savoy — supposed to be keeping on the track of the English princess and her retinue — is known to be an English nobleman of high rank, the Earl of Curzon — travelling with passport made out in name of Smith — believed to have no political aim or object — mere affair of gallantry — plenty of money — lives in closest seclusion — seen loitering near the villa — frequent appointments with some lady dwelling there — the police spy, set to watch, unable to discover who the lady is — dared not venture close enough — the earl observed to scale the garden wall — passed whole nights at the villa — opinion confirmed that it is a mere intrigue of gallantry — no notice to be taken — not to be interfered with — departed without leaving any debts."

Having ascertained these particulars, which, we should observe, were rendered as complete as possible by means of specific dates, Jocelyn Loftus took his departure from the town hall, and reëntering the hackney-coach, he ordered it to drive to the neighbourhood of the lake.

While proceeding thither, he reflected on all the details he had just gleaned from the secret registry of police. The self-styled Mr. Thompson was Colonel Malpas, and Mr. Smith was the Earl of Curzon. It was the Earl of Curzon, then, who was the faithless lover of Mrs. Roberts. But how completely identical appeared to be the objects which those two individuals had in view while visiting the Continent! Both were secretly following in the track of the Princess of Wales; each was intriguing with a lady in her household. That the earl's affair of gallantry was with Julia Owen, Loftus was already aware. Considering, then, everything he knew concerning the Misses Owen, was it not natural to infer that another of the sisters was the object of Malpas's intrigue? And in pursuance of the detestable mission which those girls had received, was it not probable enough that, while gratifying their passions on the one hand, they at the same time, on the other hand, artfully contrived to throw all the scandal of their amours upon the princess? Were not they guilty, and was not the princess innocent and unsuspecting?

Such were the conclusions to which Jocelyn naturally came, and the reader does not require to be informed how correct those surmises were. But while thus pondering on the details he had gleaned from the secret registry of police

and the deductions he had thence drawn, he could not help experiencing a sensation of disgust and loathing to think that the actions of individuals should be so minutely watched, even to the compromise of female reputations, by the myrmidons of the Genevese law. He also remarked, in the course of his meditations, that the police book did not seem to have contained any memorandum of the hiring of Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females from the villa, and it was therefore to be supposed that the police had remained altogether in the dark upon the subject. As for the two ladies whom Malpas and Curzon really intended to have carried off on that occasion, who could they be if not two of the Misses Owen?

While thus pursuing his reflections, our hero reached the vicinage of the lake, and dismissing the hackney-coach, he walked down to the bank of that inland sea. It was now near eleven o'clock. The night was tolerably clear above, for the moon was shining, but a mist hung upon the water and the surrounding shore, involving all the features of the lake in obscurity.

Advancing along the margin of the water, Loftus presently reached an old jetty which was the index of the very spot for which he was searching, in pursuance of the hint he had received from Maravelli. The gloom was now deepening, the mist from the lake increasing in density and spreading so rapidly all around and high above that the pure azure of the heaven was veiled and the moon was at length only seen dimly like a pale lamp that is extinguishing. Jocelyn paused near the jetty and listened, but no sound save the rippling of the waters met his ear. For upwards of ten minutes did he remain, leaning against one of the huge piles of the jetty, wondering to himself whether Kobolt and his men would come thither that night. At length, finding that no one approached, he thought that he would return to Maravelli's and seek them on the following night at the public-house where they were accustomed to meet, and which the physician had proposed to indicate to him. But just as he was about to quit the spot where he had been standing, he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps and at once passed underneath the jetty. Three men soon emerged from the deepening gloom, carrying some ominous-looking implements over their shoulders, and Jocelyn at once felt

convinced these were the individuals whom he sought. But wishing to make sure, he remained silent and motionless where he was, to watch their proceedings.

Speaking but little, and this little in a flash language utterly incomprehensible to our hero, the three men went to work without loss of time. Mounting the pier, they threw in their dragging-implements, — for such was the tackle they had brought upon their shoulders, — and after several ineffectual hauls an ejaculation of satisfaction broke from the lips of one of them. Jocelyn, at no loss to conjecture the meaning of the cry, peeped forth, and as at that very moment a sudden breeze, almost amounting to a squall, swept over the lake, causing the mist to part asunder, as it were, the moon broke forth in the full power of its light, and the silvery beams fell upon the face of a corpse which the fishers of men were dragging to the surface of the water.

Our hero recoiled from the ghastly spectacle, and at the same instant a terrible imprecation burst from the three men. The corpse had broken away from their tackle, the squall having suddenly produced a strong current around the pier-head.

Jocelyn now showed himself, and called to the three men to come down. Starting at the appearance of our hero, they at first seemed to hesitate, but when, in the French language, he declared that he was alone and that he had no hostile intent, the fellows hastily descended from the top of the piles.

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded the foremost, who was decidedly entitled to carry off the palm of villainous looks from his companions, vile as their appearance also was. "Are you a spy? Do you mean suicide? Or are you a sleep-walker?"

"I am none of all these," said our hero, with the calmness of true courage.

"Then what do you here, young man?" demanded the ill-looking fellow.

"I am in search of a person named Kobolt," said Jocelyn, boldly.

"Ah!" was the man's ejaculation, "do you want him for good or for evil, to do him a mischief or to make his services available? Because it may be that I can help you to an

interview with him, but all depends on your answer to the questions I have just put."

"My object is by no means a hostile one," said Jocelyn, "but will put many louis into Kobolt's pocket. One word more: Doctor Maravelli gave me the hint that I should find Kobolt here, and now you may as well admit that you are the man."

The fellow looked slowly around, plunging his eyes with keen and straining penetration into the depths of the mist, which had now closed over the lake again, to ascertain whether there were any policemen on the watch at a distance. Then, evidently satisfied on this head, he observed, "Well, I am Kobolt, and these," he added, as his two companions came more forward, "are Hernani and Walden."

"Which names," said Jocelyn, as the two villainous-looking countenances were now as completely disclosed to his view as that of the foremost individual, "were likewise mentioned to me by Doctor Maravelli."

"Well, we have no reason to doubt your good faith," said Kobolt, fixing his eyes piercingly upon our hero. "You are a good-looking youth, and scarcely seem capable of treachery. Come, let us stand beneath the jetty. It is useless to run a risk of being seen. But you are an Englishman, eh? Well, I thought so by the look of you, and I am all the better pleased, because we pick up an occasional job from Englishmen, and have experienced, moreover, that they pay well."

Thus speaking, Kobolt passed underneath the jetty, accompanied by his two confederates and followed by Jocelyn. And now they were enveloped in almost total darkness, so that they could indeed converse without fear of observation should any one approach along the border of the lake. Loftus entertained no apprehension on finding himself in this lonely spot and in the deep obscurity along with such desperate men, for, in the first place, fear was unknown to him, and, secondly, he knew full well that if they wished to make away with him, they could as easily do it by the side of the jetty as under it.

"You have just observed that you sometimes find employment from English persons," said Jocelyn. "Perhaps you remember that about three weeks ago you were engaged to carry off two ladies from a certain villa?"

"Yes," exclaimed Kobolt, "a villa in the neighbourhood

here. But you were not one of the gentlemen who hired us? "

" No," observed Hernani, the Italian, " I'll swear that he was not one of them. He's a prettier looking fellow, though they were both handsome enough."

" I did not for a moment wish you to infer that I was one of them," remarked Jocelyn. " But what I require is that you relate to me every detail and particular connected with that affair whereof we are speaking."

" Before we do so," said Kobolt, " there are two little preliminaries to be fulfilled. The first is for you to tell us why you wish to ascertain these particulars at all, and the second is to afford us a proof that you know how to reward handsomely as well as to catechize closely."

" In respect to the first condition which you have set forth," returned Jocelyn, " it must suffice for you to know that you will not in the slightest degree endanger yourselves by giving me the information I seek, and secondly, I have twenty louis set apart for you in my waistcoat pocket. Here, give me your hand, Kobolt, and I will count them into your palm."

" This is businesslike," said Walden the Switzer.

" Nothing like Englishmen for doing things in a business-like manner," said Kobolt.

" You can go into the light," said Jocelyn, when he had given Kobolt the money, " and satisfy yourself that they are all good pieces."

" The chink is enough for me," observed the ruffian, as he made the coin jingle in his hand. Then, consigning it to his pocket, he continued thus: " Some weeks ago an English gentleman, who gave the same of Smith — wasn't it Smith, Hernani? "

" Just so," was the reply. " Nine Englishmen out of every ten are named Smith."

" Well, then, this Monsieur Smith managed to introduce himself to us, — no matter how, — and after a time he engaged us for a particular business. We were to get a post-chaise and four horses to carry off two ladies from the English princess's villa. One lady was to be walking inside the grounds in one particular spot, the other also inside the grounds, but at another spot. We were to seize upon them, seal their lips — not with kisses," added the fellow, chuckling

coarsely, " no, no, the gentlemen were to do that, but with our hands, and we were told not to damage their sweet lips and beautiful teeth."

" Ah! then you were led to believe that the two ladies were young and beautiful? " said Loftus.

" So we fancied," returned Kobolt, " but we made a sad mistake. In a word, we carried off two females from the very places pointed out to us, but they turned out to be two elderly hags. Well, as there are many different ideas about beauty, and as we didn't exactly know what English taste might be, we resolved to keep possession of the old ladies, particularly as we had found them each in the very spot pointed out by our employers. But when we got to Lausanne, by the saints! what a scene ensued. It was indeed a mistake from beginning to end, and so there was nothing left to do but to bring the old ladies back again. This we did, having been assured that we should not be troubled in the matter, and, sure enough, we never have heard any more of the business in any shape or way."

" So far, so good," said Jocelyn, " and now will you inform me whether, during the last three weeks, indeed, ever since that particular night, you have experienced any peculiar good luck in your avocation as fishers of men? "

" To tell you the truth," answered Kobolt, " this is the first time we resumed our fishing occupation since that very night whereof we have been speaking, and for this seeming idleness on our part there have been two reasons. The first is, we heard that a watch had been set for us by the police, and so we thought we would rest awhile till we found the coast clear again; and secondly, we were so well paid by your fellow countrymen Smith and Thompson that we could afford to give ourselves a holiday for a short time."

" Well, and now there need be no further delay in continuing your night's sport," returned our hero.

" Perdition! " ejaculated Hernani, " the young gentleman wishes to see us at our work."

" Or else," added Walden, " he wants to become one of us."

" Hold your tongues! " growled Kobolt, savagely. " The gentleman has some other and deeper meaning. Now, sir, what is it? Let us be frank with each other."

" I have no objection," rejoined Jocelyn. " Know, then,

that I have some reason to believe the corpse of a child, a new-born infant, was thrown into the lake close by this very jetty about three weeks ago. From what I have understood, it was wrapped in a flannel that was carefully tied around it."

"And you want it fished up for some reason or another?" said Kobolt, interrogatively. "Well, if it was sunk with a stone or anything heavy, it is no doubt at the bottom still, for whatever gets into what may be called the little bay, on either side of the jetty, always remains there."

"Well," said Jocelyn, "let us waste no more time in words. You liked the chink of those twenty louis so well that you would doubtless be pleased to finger another twenty. You shall do so if you drag me up the corpse of that child."

The three men exchanged amongst themselves a few low and rapidly whispered observations in their peculiar argot, or slang language, which, as we have above stated, was utterly incomprehensive to our hero. This discourse only lasted for a minute, and when it was over, Kobolt, again addressing Loftus in the French tongue, said, "Your request about this child is so extraordinary that I and my companions hesitate to proceed farther unless you give us some explanation. The truth is, it is like advancing in the dark. We do not see into what trouble we might get ourselves, and though we are no cowards, and not overparticular what we do as long as we are well paid, yet we do not exactly choose to walk blindfold over a precipice."

"I shall assuredly give you no explanations at all," said Loftus. "If the corpse be found, I pay you for it and take it away with me. Whatever danger may result will accrue only unto me, and I am prepared to encounter it. But I do not wish you to proceed farther unless you choose. Wait until to-morrow night, and in the meantime ask Doctor Maravelli whether I am trustworthy. Then if, despite the answer you receive from him, you should still hesitate, I can but purchase drags and come and fish, as you call it, on my own account."

Again did the three men converse together in their own flash tongue, and at the end of this second consultation Kobolt exclaimed, "Well, we have made up our minds to run any risk there may be in this business."

Having thus spoken, he emerged forth from beneath the jetty, followed by his two accomplices and our hero. Deep

was the obscurity which prevailed, and which had now well-nigh absorbed the moonlight altogether. But still there was a certain hazy glimmering upon the water, and Jocelyn closely watched the preparations which the men made for their fishing experiments. They had two kinds of tackle. One was a net made in the shape of a bag, and fastened to a large hoop, to which were attached four cords, joining together at the length of about a dozen feet, and at this point of junction they were united to one good stout rope. The other sort of tackle consisted of a row of grappling-irons fastened to a bar of wood about four feet long, and with this instrument the bottom of the lake might be, as it were, raked, so as to catch hold of anything that had even become embedded in the mud or clay.

With these two distinct apparatus three or four fresh hauls were now made, the men either wading out to their middle in the water, or else climbing along the cross-beams on the side of the jetty, so as to be enabled to fling their tackle as far away from the land as possible, and thus drag the whole of the little bay formed by the wooden pier and the indented shore.

Little was said during the half-hour at first expended in this manner, but presently an exclamation from Kobolt, as he raised the net above described, drew the notice of his comrades and Jocelyn toward him.

"Here is something very much like it," he said, as he proceeded to examine the net, and from amidst a quantity of weeds, stones, and mire he dragged forth a shapeless object which he at once pronounced to be the corpse of an infant wrapped up in flannel.

One of the men now produced a piece of canvas, which made a fitting envelope for the corpse, to secure our hero's hand against too close a contact with the loathsome object. He now paid Kobolt the remaining twenty louis, according to promise, and took his departure with his strange, we might almost say dreadful, burden.

Uninterruptedly and free from molestation did our hero retrace his way to Maravelli's house, the exact position of which with regard to the lake he had not much difficulty in remembering, having been led thither direct from the water's edge (although considerably lower down) by Mrs. Roberts on the preceding night.

On reaching his temporary place of abode, he was admitted by the physician himself, who generally answered the bell at late hours, and when the front door was closed, Loftus said, " Let me at once enter your private room, and take care that no one intrudes."

" Every one in the house has retired to rest save you and me," said the doctor. " But what, in Heaven's name, have you there? " he asked.

" You shall see," returned our hero, and he hastened into the little sombre-looking parlour, followed by Maravelli.

" Ah! I can now guess what you have been about," said the latter, with a frightened look. " You have found the fishers of men; they have fished for you to some purpose. But what on earth is the meaning of all this? What mischief is brewing? Speak, let me know the worst," and the doctor trembled all over, as if shaking with the palsy, while the pallor of death overspread his countenance.

" I have already told you," said Jocelyn, in an earnest voice, " that you have nothing to fear on my account. No harm shall befall you, provided you do everything that I require at your hands. I am not warring against you; I have no personal enmity toward you. On the contrary, I have already given you a guarantee of my ability and desire to recompense you."

" With these assurances I am tranquillized," said the physician.

While this colloquy was going on, Jocelyn had placed his burden upon the table, and had loosened the canvas wrapper. It now appeared that a large stone was tied in a white cambric handkerchief around the neck of the dead infant. This Jocelyn removed, and then unrolled the flannel that had enveloped the corpse. Its face was horribly disfigured, and was not distinguishable as the countenance of a human being. But upon this we will not dwell. Loathsome indeed was the object, and Jocelyn's repugnance to meddle with it, or to think of keeping it for any time instead of at once consigning it to the earth, was only overruled by a conviction that the proceeding was one of imperious necessity and vitally important to the success of the great enterprise which he had in view.

But to continue. In order to proceed with his investigation it was necessary to procure a basin of water wherein to

soak the cambric handkerchief by which the stone was attached and the flannel garment in which the corpse had been enveloped, so completely covered, or, indeed, saturated with slimy mud were they. This being done, Loftus proceeded to examine the cambric handkerchief, and in one of the corners he found the initials E. O.

"Emma Owen," he said, as he pointed them out to Maravelli. "And you are a witness, doctor, in case of necessity, that this handkerchief was attached to the corpse."

"Yes," returned the medical man, hesitatingly. "But Heaven send that there shall be no need for any witnesses to give their testimony at all."

"Rest assured that I will manage everything in a manner to avoid scandal and exposure," said Loftus, much to the physician's satisfaction at this reiterated promise of immunity. "Now for the flannel garment," added our hero, and after closely examining this article, he said, "Doctor, what are these initials?"

"A. O.," replied the physician, easily deciphering the letters.

"Agatha Owen," said Loftus.

"Then, perhaps," exclaimed Maravelli, a light now suddenly breaking in upon him, "you do not believe that it was the princess who was delivered of a child?"

"No, I do not believe it," returned Loftus, "and you shall see that step by step I will unravel the whole skein of this dark and mysterious proceeding, tangled though it be. Hold your peace, follow my counsel, do as I require, and you shall be well rewarded; but act otherwise, seek to betray me, or disobey my directions, and you shall be exposed fully and punished mercilessly."

"Depend upon it, Mr. Loftus," said Maravelli, "I will serve you in all things," and it was now with fear and trembling that he gazed upon our young hero, who seemed like an avenging angel pursuing the thread of Heaven's own inscrutable designs.

"You have told me," he resumed, fixing his eyes upon Maravelli with a look that showed he was determined to be obeyed in whatever he demanded, "you have told me that you frequently devote your leisure hours to anatomical pursuits, and that Kobolt and his companions supply you with what the faculty denominate subjects. In that

case you must have a dissecting-room, and it is there that I propose to leave this infant corpse for the present. Now conduct me to your dissecting-room, doctor."

Maravelli took up the lamp, while Loftus, having secured the telltale cambric handkerchief and flannel about his person, enveloped the tiny corpse in the canvas, and with his loathsome burden followed the doctor, who led him through the hall opening from a dark passage at the end. This place was fitted up with all the grim, hideous machinery and apparatus of a dissecting-room. There was the pulley fixed to the ceiling, with the cord and the hook attached thereto, so as to elevate at will a corpse when stretched upon the slightly inclining plane of the leaden table over which the cordage hung. There were scalpels, dissecting-knives, saws, trepanning instruments, and various anatomical implements, pails also, to catch the fluids and the entrails of the subjects, and mops to cleanse the floor. In a word, the studio was complete for its ghastly purpose, and although there was no corpse at the moment when Maravelli led Jocelyn in, yet was there a faint, sickly odour against which the heart heaved. It seemed as if the clammy, nauseating smell of the dead had settled itself in that place, clinging to the very ceiling and walls like a grave-mist, fetid and inexpulsable.

Against the wall stood two upright boxes, tall, narrow, and painted black. One of the doors had by some accident come open, revealing a bleached skeleton as the ghastly tenant of that wooden home.

"These are the bones of a murderer, who was guillotined about seven years ago in the market-place," said the physician, pointing to the object just named. "The other box contains the skeleton of his wife, who suffered death with him and for the same cause. I obtained possession of their corpses after their execution, and have preserved their bones thus. Where the vertebræ of the neck were severed by the axe of the guillotine, I have fastened the bones with wire.

But Loftus did not pay any particular attention to these anatomies, which were in reality the objects of the physician's special admiration, and having deposited the corpse of the child upon the leaden table, he turned away from the dissecting-room.

"I shall not insult you by demanding the key of that

place," he said to Maravelli, as they again stood together in the hall, " but I charge you not to let those remains disappear from the table where I have left them."

" I shall not deceive you in any way, Mr. Loftus," responded Maravelli, as he locked the door of the dissecting-room and put the key in his pocket.

He and Jocelyn then separated, each to retire to his respective chamber; and when our hero was alone, he could not help felicitating himself upon having been enabled, by a favourable concatenation of circumstances, to do so much in comparatively so short a period of time toward the unravelment of the conspiracy against the persecuted wife of the prince regent.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE THREE SISTERS

The day that dawned upon the night of Jocelyn's adventures, as just recorded, was ushered in by one of those brilliant mornings which render the climate so wholesome, the heavens so cloudless, and the whole face of nature so transcendingly beautiful for the dweller upon the banks of Lake Leman. It was, as the reader is aware, the early part of May at the period of which we are writing, and many of those fruits which in England are not ripened until six weeks later were now gemming the borders, or hanging in rich clusters to the trees. Thus strawberries, cherries, gooseberries, currants, and all the earlier fruits were mingling their luscious hues with the emerald foliage, and the gardens belonging to the suburban villas of Geneva appeared in all the pride of their beauty.

It was about half-past seven o'clock on this lovely morning that three beautiful creatures were gathered in a balcony at the open casement of a bedchamber overlooking the garden of the princess's villa. These were Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen.

Agatha, the eldest, appeared the least thing pale and delicate. Indeed, but three weeks had elapsed since she became a mother under the circumstances already described, and with an amazing fortitude and a surprising amount of physical energy had she performed all her duties as heretofore, ever in attendance upon the princess, always one of the first down at the breakfast-table, and scrupulously regular in observing the routine of the household. Thus was it utterly impossible to suspect that she had so recently passed through that ordeal which is so terrible even for the woman who is surrounded by all comforts fitted for the occasion,

and who, by having no shame to conceal, may retain her couch until nature restores herself again. But it was not without a painful effort that Agatha had thus defied, as it were, the ordinary course of nature, and there had been moments when, though the smile was upon her lip, agony was in all her limbs, and though her spirits seemed elevated as if inspired by thrilling music, her frame was in reality drooping as if she must sink down through mere exhaustion. Indeed, had it not been for certain excellent restoratives and sovereign cordials which Mrs. Ranger had administered, Agatha never could have sustained her part in such a manner; but even though she succeeded in doing so, it was at some little sacrifice of her health, and the wonder with her sisters and Mrs. Ranger was, not that she looked somewhat pale and delicate, but that she was so little pale and delicate as she appeared.

And now behold her, in a loose morning wrapper, one of those elegant French muslin negligees which so well become a lovely woman and give such an air of sweet and touching interest to the invalid, one of those negligees, in a word, which tantalize the eye with glimpses of the charms that they envelop and which reveal all the contours that they ought to conceal. But it was through no coquetry at the present moment that Agatha Owen had assumed this winning garb; it was merely thrown hastily on ere her toilet was completed, in order that she might enjoy with her sisters the fresh air of the morning in that balcony, and woo to her pale face the breeze which, blowing softly and gently over the warm plains, lost the chill at first imparted by the snow-capped mountains. For such a breeze was well calculated to bring the blush of the rose back to Agatha's countenance, and as she inhaled that pure air, it seemed as if her lungs expanded with the renovation of vigorous health.

One arm, the roundness of which was defined by an elegant bracelet, lay negligently over the plump white shoulders of her sister Emma, whose morning toilet was completed; while on the other side of Agatha appeared Julia, equally lovely, equally dissolute, but more sentimental and affectionate than her sisters.

Agatha's dark brown hair was arranged in glossy bands, ornamented with a white rose, an emblem of that chastity which she possessed not. Emma's hair was in tresses, but

gathered in a knot behind, and fastened with a circlet of pearls, being thus drawn up from a neck that was dazzling in its whiteness and admirable in its arching shapeliness. Julia's hair showered in a myriad ringlets over her white sloping shoulders, and down upon her fine bosom, which the morning dress left much exposed, according to the fashion of the time. She also wore a white rose at the side of her head, and of her it might be observed, as of her elder sister, that it was an emblem of the purity which had passed away from her.

Very beautiful appeared the three sisters as they thus inhaled the fresh breeze of morning in that balcony worked over with embroidery of real flowers, and, alas! sorrowful indeed is the reflection that the external aspect of those lovely creatures was very far from serving as an index of their minds within. Fair and stainless were the caskets as they seemed to the eye, but no gems of matchless price were enclosed in those angelic incarnations. No, in proportion as the exterior embellishments were beautiful and captivating, so were the internal thoughts corrupt and impure. Ah! of what avail is the snowy bosom if the heart that beats within is a volcano of furious passions?

But to continue the thread of our narrative. Between seven and eight on this delightful morning was it that Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were together in the balcony of the eldest sister's chamber.

" Who could ever wish to return to cold and cheerless England from such a clime as this? " said Julia, as she slowly carried her fine hazel eyes over the garden belonging to the villa, the fields beyond, and the mountains which rose in the distance.

" Would you really like to settle down at Geneva with some good-tempered, confiding husband, a native of the country? " asked Emma, raising her own dark eyes toward her younger sister.

" No, I do not think I should like to marry a foreigner," replied Julia.

" Well, then," resumed Emma, " what should you say to settling down here, in a villa of your own, as an independent lady, but of course with a lover on the sly to be a consolation and a companion in hours that would otherwise be monotonous indeed? "

" I am sure," said Agatha, the eldest sister, " that you can neither be such silly girls as to think of settling here in a foreign country. In the first place, to marry on the Continent is really no joke, for if the husband should happen to catch you going a little astray, he can have you locked up in prison for a couple of years or so. Then, as to the other alternative, of always solacing oneself with lovers, let me assure you that nothing would be more dreadful than to be exposed to the jealousy of these foreign admirers. It frequently happens that they murder their mistresses through excessive love, and then make away with themselves."

" Ah! this is a little exaggeration and romancing on your part, Agatha," observed Emma, laughing. " However, I can safely promise you that I have no thought of settling myself here, and I can answer for Julia that she is not so foolish, either."

" So far," resumed Agatha, " from our even dreaming of such a thing, I sincerely hope that we shall soon be enabled to give up our present mission and receive its reward."

" Hush! do not speak too loud," said Emma. " We may be overheard from the neighbouring windows. But speaking of a reward, what recompense will be conferred on us, think you? The prince regent could scarcely create us peeresses in our own right, with handsome pensions. The scandal would be too great," she continued, in a low and cautious tone, " after we shall have been called upon to give evidence against the princess — "

" Hush! hush! 'tis for you now to be cautious, you silly girl," said Julia, placing her hand playfully upon her sister's mouth.

" What should you say, then," asked Agatha, bending down and speaking in a whisper, " if the prince were to find each of us an old wealthy peer, just so far advanced in his dotage as to be amorously inclined, without being overnice as to the reputation his bride may have borne before her marriage? "

" Something of this sort must the prince do for us," said Emma.

" Mamma hinted as much in the last letter she wrote to Mrs. Ranger," said Agatha. " But come, you must assist me to finish my toilet. The hour advances for us to descend to the breakfast-table."

Thus speaking, the eldest sister stepped back from the balcony into her chamber, and putting off the elegant French wrapper, she proceeded to array herself in the garb prescribed by the fashion of the time as the morning toilet for ladies in attendance upon royalty. This costume partook more of that which constitutes the evening dress of the present day, for the corsage was cut low, the sleeves were short, and a profusion of jewelry was worn.

"I wonder," said Emma, as she assisted Agatha to put on her dress, "whether the change of affairs in France will turn to the advantage of our former friend, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, as he chose to call himself," and she laughed gaily at the reminiscences which the mention of his name conjured up.

"Doubtless he is still a prisoner at Grenoble," said Agatha. "At all events, he was still a captive there at the time the last accounts were received in England from the French authorities respecting him."

"Ah!" observed Julia, "but that was before the sudden and unexpected return of Napoleon into France. We know not what may have happened since —"

"Depend upon it," interrupted Agatha, "if Jocelyn — I suppose we shall never call him by any other name than Jocelyn," she added, laughing. "But I was going to observe that if he were free, you may rely upon it we should have heard or seen something of him at Geneva ere this. Come, Julia, confess, would you not like to have to play Laura Linden all over again?"

"If you could ensure me a successful result," rejoined the youngest of the three charming demireps, "but that was something more than you could even achieve for yourselves," she added, with a merry laugh that rang musically through the chamber.

"Never did a young man withstand such temptations before," said Emma. "May we not without vanity declare that it was the three Graces tempting Apollo?"

"Three goddesses tempting a youth of godlike beauty," observed Agatha. "You know that at Richmond we were called the Four Goddesses."

"Including poor Mary," said Julia, with a sigh. "I wish she was with us, instead of being buried in that cottage in Canterbury, where she still was when mamma last wrote —"

" Oh, never mind Mary," interrupted Agatha, somewhat petulantly. " She is something more than sentimental, she is a maudlin, sickening spoony with her rigid ideas of virtue. But we have been talking of Jocelyn Loftus. How is it that not once, during the present conversation, the names of Curzon and Malpas have been mentioned? " she asked, her beautiful countenance softening into an arch smile.

" What! " ejaculated Emma, " after the scandalous trick they endeavoured to play us, plotting to carry us off to Lausanne by means of such dreadful villains as that Kobolt and his gang, whom, as we have since heard, rumour declares to be nothing less than resurrection-men. Ah! if I were old Mrs. Ranger, I should never fancy myself again after having been in contact with those ruffians. I should always suspect my very clothes smelled of dead bodies. And old Mrs. Hubbard, too."

" I really cannot help laughing," said Agatha, " when I think of those two antiquated heroines of the abduction scene."

" How astounded Malpas must have been! " said Emma. " Served him right, too. I am very glad of it."

" Poor Curzon! " murmured the sentimental Julia, " I really think the punishment was too severe, seeing that he meant to carry me off through love."

" I dare say if you were to meet him again, Julia," said Agatha, " you would forgive him."

" She might," exclaimed Emma, " but I declare I would never forgive Malpas."

" Nor would I forgive Curzon," retorted Julia, raising her head proudly. " You both seem to think I am weak-minded and foolish. I tell you that I am as strong in purpose as either of you, and therefore, once for all, let me beg that I may be believed when I declare that whenever I meet Curzon again I will tell him frankly and candidly that everything is at an end between us. As for you, Emma," she continued, flinging a somewhat angry but also arch look upon her sister, " it is very easy of you to talk so slightingly of Malpas, since you have already formed a new attachment. Ah! don't think that I am blind to the amorous looks which you have lately flung upon the good-looking equerry."

" What! Baron Bergami? " ejaculated Agatha. Then,

evidently struck by something, she immediately added, "And now that I recollect, you have so managed, Emma, for some days past that he shall sit next to you at breakfast and give you his arm from the drawing-room to the dining-room. Yes, and also last evening and the evening before, when we all walked out along the shore — Ah! Emma, how the blood is rising to your cheek!" exclaimed Agatha, laughing, as she held her snowy hand against her sister's face, which had indeed become of the richest carnation. "How it burns!"

"Come, I will make a confession," said Emma, now endeavouring to escape from her confusion in a merry laugh, "and I know not why I should have attempted to conceal this new feeling even for a single day, inasmuch as we do not usually have any secrets from each other. The truth is, I have been playing Baron Bergami so long and to such effect that I have fallen in love with him myself. Now, my dear girls, you must observe that when I am dressed up for that particular purpose, with my hair all gathered so as to appear to flow just down as far as the nape of the neck, like Bergami's, with that elegant frock coat, too, imprisoning me in the admirable symmetry of its shapely cut, then, with those trousers with their great plaits at the hips and around the front, gradually diminishing until they terminate in a graceful arch over the boots, yes, and then those loves of boots themselves, so exquisitely shaped, with such high heels, making me at least two inches taller than I am, and giving such a hollow to the shape of my foot that as I stand you might roll a half-crown upright underneath, when I see myself thus attired, the snowy shirt-frill arranged in such a manner as to conceal the swell of my bosom, and last, though not least, those false whiskers and that elegant moustache, when I contemplate myself, I say, thus attired, in the full-length mirror, I really fancy that I am Bergami — and — and — don't you think that the baron is very, very handsome?"

The manner in which Emma asked this question suddenly gave such a droll turn to the graphic and picturesque portraiture she had been drawing of herself that Agatha and Julia could not help bursting out laughing. Emma also laughed, and a delightful spectacle was it, the mirth of those three lovely girls, a mirth that displayed teeth white as

ivory between lips of wet coral, teeth which were pure and perfect as pearls themselves could be, and lips which seemed so fresh in their dewy moisture that it were hard indeed to believe that the hot kisses of burning lust had ever been pressed upon them. But, oh, who that observes the rose when drooping at eve with the diamond dewdrops sparkling upon every modestly closing leaf, would imagine that this flower seemingly so pure, so chaste, so delicate, had been boldly basking in the gorgeous sunlight during the whole day, and had drunk in the impassioned glow without parching or scorching?

" Then are we to understand," said Agatha, when her own and her sisters' mirth had somewhat subsided, " that you love Bergami? "

" Yes, love him as I loved Jocelyn," answered Emma, " because he was handsome and I desired him; or love him as I have loved Malpas, because I cannot exist without a lover."

" Oh, we can understand why you love him," exclaimed Agatha, still laughing. " But remember, Emma," she added, more seriously, " these amours may have their consequences, as mine did, and it may not always be so easy to get over them — "

" Well, my dear sister," interrupted Emma, " it will be time enough to talk of that when the danger presents itself. Besides, you must not get on too fast in your conjectures. I am very far from having ensnared Bergami as yet. He even appears rather distant, — not exactly distant, for he is politeness itself, as you well know, but he will not see that I love him. If my hand lingers in his, he does not press it; if my looks fix themselves upon him, his are cast down; if my foot happens to rest against his under the table, he begs my pardon, as if he himself had accidentally kicked me."

" Why, this is as bad as Loftus in the post-chaise," exclaimed Agatha, " when we first travelled with him, and before we knew who he really was. And yet the baron does not look as if he would prove another Jocelyn, nor do I believe that there can be more than one man of Jocelyn's stoic disposition in the world, and that man is Jocelyn himself."

" Well, at all events, I intend to subdue Bergami if it be

possible," observed Emma. "By the bye," she added, suddenly turning the conversation to another topic as a thought struck her, "did not her Royal Highness say something yesterday about getting up private theatricals for our own amusement here at the villa?"

"Yes," answered Julia, "but in consequence of some observation that was made by one of the ladies, I fancy her Royal Highness will renounce the idea."

"Ah! I recollect," said Emma. "The princess was reminded that her husband, the prince regent, had given a series of private theatricals at Carlton House, and she does not wish to imitate at Geneva what he does in London."

"I noticed that her Royal Highness," continued Julia, "was looking, last evening, when we returned from our walk, over the file of English newspapers, and I saw that she was scanning with great attention a description which the *Times* gave of the very first private representation, in December last, at Carlton House. I watched her Royal Highness as she read over the names of all the élite of the aristocracy who were present. Of course there was the brilliant and incomparable Lady Sackville, the Countess of Curzon, the Marchioness of Conyngham, Miss Bathurst, Miss Arbuthnot, Lady Prescott —"

"Oh, never mind enumerating the names," interrupted Emma. "We have scanned them over and over again a dozen times. Depend upon it that her Royal Highness regards as a personal enemy, and also as a positive rival, every young and good-looking woman who visits at Carlton House."

"No doubt she does, and naturally so under the circumstances," observed Agatha. "But what has all this got to do with the topic on which we were conversing, the private theatricals?"

"Oh, only this," returned Julia, "that I was about to add, when Emma interrupted me, that so soon as her Royal Highness read over that list of names, she said, 'Oh, I perceive that one must have the most dazzling beauties that can be congregated to make private theatricals go off well, and therefore we will not attempt anything of the sort here.' This she said with considerable bitterness," observed Julia.

At this moment a timepiece on the mantel in Agatha's room chimed half-past eight, and the three young ladies, suddenly cutting short their colloquy, hastened down to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE AUDIENCE AND THE LETTER

It was a little past noon on the same day, and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was walking in the garden, attended by Agatha, Emma, and Julia, as ladies in waiting, the other three ladies of her suite not being on duty for this day. The Baron Bergami was likewise present as equerry in waiting.

Her Royal Highness was at this time forty-five years of age. She was stout; her embonpoint had expanded into luxuriance, slightly perhaps approaching to coarseness. Her cheeks had a somewhat heightened colour upon them, which was not exactly that of health, but seemed to indicate a love of good living. Nevertheless she was temperate and abstemious, and that inclination to ruddiness was entirely natural. Her neck, being totally deficient in that graceful arching which gives a statuesque and dignified air to a well-dressed woman, had the same awkwardness of appearance as if it were short. Her eyes were handsome and of a fine blue, indicating good temper and generosity of heart. It was perhaps this expression, added to a placid, unaffected smile, which from her girlhood had seemed stereotyped upon her lips, which to some degree prevented the observer from noticing the shade of mournfulness which nevertheless had for years past been growing upon her countenance; and as her disposition was naturally lively and vivacious, she did not outwardly display as much feeling as she inwardly experienced relative to the misfortunes that had overtaken her and the bitter hatred of which her husband made her the victim. In a word, that she was an amiable, well-meaning, kind-hearted woman, there can be no doubt; that she was thoughtless, and that her manners were characterized with

all the freedom peculiar to Continental ladies, cannot be denied; but that she was criminal and faithless to her husband is not to be believed for a single moment.

And now a few words relative to Bergami. He was at the time of which we are writing about thirty-eight years of age, and remarkably handsome. His dark hair, glossy whiskers, and delicately pencilled moustache set off a countenance that was pale and pensive. His dark eyes were generally cast downward, as if in thought, but his fine form, slender even to youthful symmetry, was upright as a dart. He dressed habitually in deep black, though on formal occasions, when in attendance upon the princess, he wore a sort of uniform surtout coat of blue cloth, frogged, braided, and buttoned close up to the ch . In either costume he looked the perfect gentleman, but in the latter he had a military appearance truly becoming.

In manners he was gentle, unassuming, but agreeably courteous. His conversation, unobtrusive and quiet, was interesting, instructive, and often fascinating, while he himself appeared entirely unconscious of its powers. Toward the princess his demeanour was ever characterized by the most marked respect, and though from his very boyhood he had known her, yet did he never appear to lose sight of the great distance which social conventionalisms had placed between him and her. Indeed, so delicate, so considerate, and so nobly generous was his behaviour toward her Royal Highness that he never, under any circumstances, would allow himself to be left alone with her even for an instant; and if, when in the drawing-room, he beheld a chance of all the ladies in waiting being absent from the apartment at one and the same moment, he invariably made it a point of retiring ere left in *tête-à-tête* with the princess.

Having recorded these few observations relative to characters whom history has made memorable, we now resume the thread of our narrative.

"I am sure I do not know how long we are likely to remain here," said the princess, pursuing the thread of a conversation already commenced in the drawing-room ere she came out to walk in the garden. "So much now depends upon the course which events may take in France. You see, it is quite evident from the newspaper reports that there will

be a desperate struggle between Bonaparte and the Allies. Is it not so, baron? "

" No doubt of it, madam," responded Bergami, to whom the query was addressed. " Immense preparations are being made, and it is probable that your Royal Highness's august father, the Duke of Brunswick, will be invested with a very important command in the armies mustered for the coming conflict."

" And if Napoleon be beaten? " said the princess, inquiringly.

" Then peace, your Royal Highness will instantaneously be given to Europe — I may add, to the whole world," answered Bergami.

" But if, on the other hand, Napoleon should conquer? " asked the princess.

" Then, madam," rejoined the equerry, " it will be impossible to foresee the consequences. But this much may be predicted, that all Continental Europe is sure to be subjected to the emperor's sway."

" And as the wife of the prince regent," continued her Royal Highness, " I should incur the risk of being seized upon by the French, even here at Geneva, and thrown into some fortress. Well, then, as I was telling you, young ladies, just now," she continued, addressing herself to Agatha and Julia, while Emma remained behind, walking by the side of Bergami, " our sojourn in this beautiful spot depends entirely on the course that occurrences may take."

At this moment a page was seen advancing from the villa, and approaching the princess, he said, with a low obeisance, " May it please your Royal Highness, an English lady craves an audience."

" Give me the lady's card, that I may hand it to her Royal Highness," at once said Agatha, who, as well as her sisters, was ever on the alert to prevent any one from obtaining access to the princess unless it suited their purpose.

" The lady neither gave name nor card," said the page, " but requested that this note might be handed to her Royal Highness, should there be any hesitation manifested in receiving her."

According to the etiquette invariably observed in respect to royal personages, Agatha, as the senior lady in waiting,

received the note which the page now presented, and opening it, she ran her eyes quickly over its contents.

"Oh, it is no one of any consequence, — a mere pretence and excuse," she said. "Your Royal Highness will do well to decide upon not granting this interview."

"But what does the note say?" asked the princess. "Who is the lady? What does she pretend to be?"

"Evidently an impostress," rejoined Agatha. "Your Royal Highness's exceeding benevolence and charity give encouragement to all kinds of persons to approach as suppliants for your bounty. Shall I order the page to state that your Royal Highness cannot be disturbed at present?"

The princess, good-natured and confiding as she was, and never liking to thwart the ladies by whom she was surrounded, was about to give her assent to the course which Agatha suggested, when the sudden fancy took her that she would look at that note which had just been presented. Perhaps it was a mere whim on the princess's part thus to peruse that note, or perhaps it was that Miss Owen had on this occasion slightly overacted her part and had seemed too anxious to prevent the audience solicited, so that a faint suspicion, but vague and indefinite, was excited in the princess's mind. Whichever were the cause, certain it is that the princess suddenly assumed an air of decision and firmness which she seldom wore on ordinary occasions, and turning to Agatha, she said, "Give me that note."

Miss Owen dared not disobey, nor was she even imprudent enough to show any reluctance, but at once placed the billet in her Royal Highness's hand. The princess thereupon glanced over its contents, which ran as follows:

"May it please your Royal Highness, the writer of this is a lady who has had the honour of enjoying the acquaintance of your Royal Highness's august daughter the Princess Charlotte, and she has likewise been honoured by the notice of her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia. She is the bearer of a letter of the utmost importance from the latter princess to your Royal Highness, and therefore most respectfully and humbly solicits an interview, that she may have an opportunity of presenting the same to your Royal Highness, she being pledged to deliver that letter into your Royal Highness's own hand. If your Royal Highness's suppliant refrains from appending her name to this letter,

it is for a reason which will be satisfactorily explained should the honour of an audience be granted."

"I really do not see, Miss Owen," said the princess, with a voice and look of gentle though grave remonstrance, "that you were justified in coming to so rapid and uncharitable a conclusion relative to the writer of this note. There is nothing on the face of it which should have led you to suppose that she wished to obtain access to me for mendicant purposes."

"Your Royal Highness must surely be aware," answered Agatha, with the coolest effrontery, "that the writers of begging letters adopt all kinds of subterfuges and devices — "

"But I do not think this is a case in point," interrupted the princess, still in a tone of rebuke. "At all events — "

"Heaven forbid that I should venture to interpose my humble opinion, well meant though it be, in a manner disagreeable to your Royal Highness!" And as Agatha thus spoke with an assumed tone of deep humiliation, she affected also to be hurt by her royal mistress's manner toward her, and the crocodile tears trickled down her cheeks.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the generous-hearted princess, touched by Agatha's apparent grief, "not for a moment did I intend to wound your feelings. I have no doubt that you acted for the best."

"As I always do, in my love and devotion toward your Royal Highness," said Agatha, now pretending to cheer up. "But if you have resolved, madam, to see this lady, permit me, at all events, to go and satisfy myself that she is a person who may with propriety be introduced into your royal presence."

"Whoever she may be, I will see her," said the princess, again speaking in a tone of decision. Then addressing the page, she said, "Go and bring that lady hither. I will see her here."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia exchanged quick glances with each other, to imply their fear that something was wrong, but these looks were so swiftly interchanged that they were not noticed by either the princess or Bergami.

Her Royal Highness now placed herself on one of the elegant garden seats, made of iron and painted green, which were ranged at intervals along the walks. Agatha stood

on her right hand, Emma, Julia, and Bergami took their stations behind their royal mistress. Nothing was now said during the couple of minutes which elapsed ere the page reappeared, escorting the visitress thither. But during that brief interval her Royal Highness once more perused the note which she still held in her hand, while Agatha hastily collected all her ideas and summoned all her presence of mind to her aid, for she felt convinced that some scene requiring no ordinary artifice, ingenuity, and duplicity was now at hand.

The moment the page was again seen advancing, all eyes were fixed upon the lady who accompanied him, and Agatha as well as her sisters at once perceived that every chance of being enabled to throw upon her the slur of a begging-letter impostress was gone. For she was not only handsomely dressed in half-mourning, but her whole appearance indicated the well-bred, elegant lady in good circumstances. On approaching the princess, she raised her veil and revealed a handsome countenance, whose beauty was enhanced at the moment by the glow which the excitement she now experienced conjured up to her cheeks. The princess instantaneously fancied that those features were not altogether unknown to her, but beyond this she had no defined and positive recollection of the lady. As for Agatha and her sisters, they were totally unacquainted with her, but the quick glances they flung upon her as she accosted their royal mistress seemed intended to pierce her through and through.

The page, having conducted the visitress into the presence of the Princess Caroline, withdrew to a distance, beyond ear-shot, so as to be ready to show her out again from the garden when the interview should be ended. The lady made a courtly obeisance as she approached the princess, and then stood waiting to be spoken to before she herself ventured to breathe a word. Indeed, her whole manner, conduct, and bearing at once proved that she was accustomed to the etiquette of royal circles.

"I have read your note, madam, with the greatest attention and interest," began the princess, with a voice and mien alike affable and encouraging. "You say that you have a letter?"

"In the first place, may it please your Royal Highness,"

said Agatha, advancing a step or two, "this lady will be kind enough to go through the usual formality and give me her card, that I may present it to your Royal Highness."

"Most cheerfully will I do so at once," answered the lady, in a mild but firm voice, "provided that the mention of my name may not in any way prejudice the object of my mission," and here her large dark eyes were swept rapidly over the three ladies in waiting, whom she no doubt at once perceived to be sisters, and thence perhaps guessed who they were.

"Your card, madam?" said Agatha, somewhat imperiously. "No stranger is allowed to exchange words with her Royal Highness until the name has been duly announced and the presence of the individual approved of."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the lady, "to read the letter of which I am the bearer?" and she raised her hand to the bosom of her dress to draw forth the despatch she alluded to.

"Madam, your card?" repeated Agatha, now speaking more imperiously than before, and extending her hand to receive the card which she thus demanded in a way that showed she would take no refusal.

"Yes," said the princess, herself beginning to think there was something suspicious in the lady refusing to give her name, "you must announce who you are, and I promise that whatever name it may be, the avowal shall not in any way prejudice you, though I am at a loss to conceive how you should entertain such an idea, provided it be a name which you can make known without a blush."

But as the princess thus spoke, a blush did arise, and quickly, too, upon the cheeks of the lady, which Agatha, instantly perceiving, failed not to take advantage of.

"This lady evidently dares not reveal her name," she said. "It will be much better for her to withdraw at once," and this hint, intended indeed as a command, was accompanied by an imperious gesture of the hand.

Now, in real truth, Agatha as senior lady in waiting, was only performing her duty by insisting on the name being given or on the lady's prompt withdrawal. The lady herself seemed to know this full well, and, as the princess remained silent, allowing the affair to take its proper course, she said,

"I crave pardon for this hesitation and delay on my part. Here is my card."

"Lady Prescott," said Agatha, as she glanced at the card which was now handed to her. Then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she turned toward the princess and whispered, "This lady is not a fit character to be here. Your Royal Highness will doubtless remember that amongst the list of those who were present at the private theatricals at Carlton House last December — "

"Ah! to be sure, I remember," said her Royal Highness, "the name of Lady Prescott was amongst them. But is not this also the name of one of the ladies belonging to the queen's household?"

"It is so, madam," replied Agatha. Then, in a still lower and more impressive tone, she added, "This lady comes from the camp of your Royal Highness's enemies."

At this moment Emma bent down her head over the princess's shoulder, and said, in a whisper, "Lady Prescott is no longer in the queen's household. I remember reading in the newspaper of her resignation some months ago, and of her being succeeded by Miss Arbuthnot."

"I think also," superadded Agatha, who had just been taking another brief but piercing survey of Lady Prescott, "I think that if her ladyship be not privately married, she at least ought to be."

"Yes," observed the princess, now fixing her eyes also with steadfastness upon Lady Prescott, "beyond all doubt she ought to be married. But, oh, the English court, and those private theatricals at Carlton House," and here her Royal Highness shook her head ominously.

This hurried and whispered colloquy occupied but little more than a minute, during which Lady Prescott remained standing at a distance of about four yards from the garden seat where the princess was placed, and though she caught not a syllable of what was uttered, she nevertheless was at no loss to understand that the observations thus covertly passing concerned herself. Not, however, that she for a moment suspected her actual condition was descried. She had flattered herself that her pregnancy was imperceptible with the dress which she wore and the appliances of art she had put in requisition to conceal her shame. But the keen eyes of Agatha, who had passed through all that process of

concealment and artifice, had not failed to detect the secret, while Lady Prescott herself fancied that the whispered discourse which was going on merely regarded the little bit of scandal that had been coupled with her name in London at the time of her resignation of her situation at court. But still, even this idea, which had previously made her blush ere she revealed her name now made her blush again as she observed those rapid whisperings which were passing amongst the group, and the piercing glances that were flung toward her.

" May it please your Royal Highness," she said, recovering her presence of mind, " I did not at once reveal my name, for fear some prejudice might exist against it. But my mission will be accomplished if you permit me to hand this letter, which is addressed to yourself from your Royal Highness's august sister-in-law and cousin the Princess Sophia."

" I think you would do well, Lady Prescott," interrupted Agatha, " to withdraw. Her Royal Highness even wonders at your audacity in appearing before her in a condition which, had you any feeling of decency, you would have been only too anxious to conceal."

A deadly pallor overspread the countenance of the unhappy Lady Prescott as the eldest Miss Owen thus addressed her in words proving that her secret had indeed been penetrated. But with a desperate resolve to accomplish her mission, she drew forth a letter from her bosom, advanced toward the princess, and said, " Take it, madam, I implore you to take it. Whatever I may be, my shame, my misfortune, cannot alter nor prejudice the contents of this note; and you may judge of its importance by the risk of exposure which I have run in undertaking to be the bearer of it."

" No, her Royal Highness cannot receive anything from your hand," said Agatha, sternly. " Withdraw, madam, withdraw. Every moment that you remain here is an additional insult to her Royal Highness."

" Take care, Miss Owen," retorted the now enraged, almost maddened Lady Prescott, " that the time does not come when your presence shall also be regarded as an insult."

" This is a sheer impertinence," exclaimed Agatha, with the quickness of a hysterical excitement, and from head to

foot she trembled with a mortal terror, as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet.

"Give me that letter and begone," exclaimed the princess, sternly addressing herself to Lady Prescott, whose conduct she naturally regarded as a deliberate and wanton insolence toward Miss Owen.

Lady Prescott accordingly handed the letter to the princess and then hurried away, overwhelmed with confusion, and consoled only by the reflection that after having dared so much, and likewise endured so much, she had succeeded in placing Jocelyn's despatch in the hands of her Royal Highness. The page, who was waiting at a distance, hastened to conduct her out of the garden, but ere she quitted the grounds she threw a hasty look back, and beheld the princess with the letter open in her hands.

"She is reading it, she is reading it!" said Lady Prescott to herself, and in the joy now experienced on account of the success of her mission she forgot for the moment the indignity, the humiliation, and the exposure through which she had just passed.

But let us return to the royal group. The moment the Princess Caroline had taken the letter in the manner already described from Lady Prescott, she tore it open, and the envelope she in her haste let fall upon the ground. Agatha stooped, picked it up, and appeared to fold it in an unpremeditated, unwitting manner, while the princess opened the letter which the envelope had contained.

It was the missive from the Princess Sophia, and ran as follows:

"St. James's Palace, London.
"December, 1814.

"My dearest Caroline: — I beg and entreat of you to see the bearer of this, who will explain to you what his object is in approaching you, what he has already suffered in the endeavour to seek you, and how it is that he is compelled to adopt extraordinary means to obtain access to your presence. He bears the name of Jocelyn Loftus, but that is not his real one. This he will reveal to you, together with the reasons which have induced him to adopt the assumed one. On no account be dissuaded from seeing him. That attempts will be made so to dissuade you, I am well aware beforehand, but I entreat you, for your own sake, for

the sake of your dear daughter Charlotte, who knows of the step which is being taken, I entreat you, I say, not to listen to any representations that may be made in order to prevent him from obtaining access to you. Rest assured it is of the highest importance. At all events see him, hear him, and then judge for yourself.

"Ever your affectionate sister-in-law and cousin,

"SOPHIA."

Over the shoulders of her Royal Highness did the sharp eyes of Emma and Julia peruse this letter, while they had all the appearance of standing in respectful attention behind her, so that not even Bergami himself noticed that they were thus scanning their royal mistress's correspondence. As for Agatha, who was standing by the princess, she had been engaged in folding up the envelope in an apparently listless manner, but in reality with the utmost care to preserve it.

"Here is a singular letter," exclaimed the princess. "You may read it, my dear girl," she added, handing it to Agatha, "and I must thank you, by the bye, for the manner in which you ere now vindicated not only the respect due to me, but also the delicacy of our sex with regard to that Lady Prescott. But how could she have become the bearer of this letter, seeing that it speaks of a Mr. Loftus? Moreover, it is dated in December, and this is May. My sister-in-law the Princess Sophia has chosen a somewhat laggard messenger, and the vital importance of the document must have worn itself out over and over again long ere this. But have I not heard the name of Jocelyn Loftus before?" she asked, with the air of one who seeks for a particular reminiscence.

"Assuredly, madam," was Agatha's prompt reply. "Does not your Royal Highness recollect our dear kind friend Mrs. Ranger informing you how grossly we were insulted by that young man whom we took to be a gentleman — or I even think he said he was a nobleman in disguise, did he not, Emma?"

"He did," was the young lady's response. "But you recollect what sad accounts we heard of him, and how he was arrested for travelling under a false name and being a very bad, suspicious character indeed."

" Yes," interjected Julia, " and you recollect, too, how I was compelled to remain behind you in Paris, through illness, and what dreadful things I learned in addition to all you had previously heard — "

" Well, my dear girls," interrupted the princess, " you can set your minds at rest by the reflection that Mr. Loftus does not appear to be forthcoming to seek an audience at my hands. How Lady Prescott could have become the bearer of a letter which it was evidently intended for him to deliver is a mystery beyond all conjecture."

" Who knows," said Agatha, " but that this Lady Prescott is the mistress of the adventurer Loftus? Your Royal Highness may rest assured that he has imposed by some means upon the Princess Sophia, worked upon her credulity, and by his specious tales, as plausible as they are false, induced her to give him that letter of introduction to your Royal Highness? "

" There is a mystery about all this," remarked the princess, a gradual uneasiness arising in her mind, and vague suspicions slowly developing their shadows around her like undefined phantoms dimly seen. " I know not what to think. From all I have heard, the impression made upon my mind relative to Mr. Loftus is certainly of no favourable nature. But then my sister-in-law's letter, so energetically, so emphatically worded, warns me against being dissuaded from seeing him. What does the baron think of all this? "

Thus speaking, she abruptly turned toward Bergami, who, in his usual mood of intellectual pensiveness, had remained all along a silent witness of the whole scene which we have been describing. But he had lost nothing, neither deed nor word, for even when the young ladies were whisperingly directing the princess's attention to Lady Prescott's condition, the baron, placed where he was, could not help overhearing all that was said.

" What is your opinion, I ask," repeated the princess, " upon all these matters? "

" Your Royal Highness is aware that whenever my sentiments are desired, I invariably give them frankly and candidly." Such was Bergami's reply, delivered in a tone replete with the musical mildness of courtesy, but with the accentuation of a manly decision.

"Then I desire you to speak with your usual frankness now," said the princess, both encouragingly and impatiently. "Come, baron, what is your opinion?"

"I think, may it please your Royal Highness," said Bergami, "that if Lady Prescott had been suffered to enter into details, she would have explained any seeming contradictions or anomalies in all this proceeding. For instance, she might have stated how it is that the letter is dated in December and is only delivered in May, how she comes to be the bearer of it, where Mr. Loftus is, and all other particulars. I therefore think, may it please your Royal Highness, that considering this letter emanates from the Princess Sophia, that it addresses you so seriously, and that it adjures you so solemnly, I think, I say, that it would have been prudent to have heard Lady Prescott at greater length, notwithstanding it was indiscreet in the beginning for a lady in her condition to have appeared before you. At all events, if Mr. Loftus be in Geneva, as I think is probable, it would be but prudent to see him."

"Then I have made up my mind how to act," exclaimed the princess, who was entirely a creature of impulse, and, starting abruptly from the garden seat, she added, "Baron, I confide this matter entirely to you, with the request that you lose no time in sifting it to the very bottom. You, as a man, can see Mr. Loftus, whatever be his character; you can hear what he has to say, and judge accordingly. But if he be not at Geneva, then may you probably find out Lady Prescott's abode, and with some suitable apology for introducing yourself to her, ascertain what more she may have to say upon the business which brought her hither ere now. In conducting these inquiries let this letter itself serve as your credential."

With these words the Princess Caroline placed Sophia's despatch in the hands of Bergami, who forthwith took his departure to enter upon the investigation with which he was now charged. The princess then reëntered the villa, followed by the three sisters, who exchanged looks of apprehension and alarm with each other.

"I can now dispense with your attendance until dinner-time," said her Royal Highness to the young ladies, "for I shall retire to my own room and pen a long epistle to the Princess Sophia, who at all events must have been animated

by the kindest possible motives when she wrote that letter which was ere now delivered to me."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia, being thus released from attendance on their royal mistress for the next three or four hours, withdrew to one of their own chambers, to deliberate upon the scene which had ere now taken place in the garden. The moment they were alone together, Agatha produced the envelope which she had picked up and retained, for at the time her quick eye had caught some writing inside the paper as it fell to the ground.

The three sisters now read it in the following terms:

" MADAM: — The undersigned, Jocelyn Loftus, the individual mentioned in the enclosed letter from the Princess Sophia, presents his duty to your Royal Highness, and begs to state that, having suffered an imprisonment of between four and five months at Grenoble, namely, from December until three days ago, he was unable to take any earlier steps toward placing the letter in your Royal Highness's hand.

" He does not now seek a personal interview in the first instance with your Royal Highness, because he is well aware that certain circumstances, which he has to explain, would tend to defeat any such endeavour on his part to approach your Royal Highness.

" He however hopes that the lady who has kindly consented to become the bearer of this letter to your Royal Highness will be enabled to return with a favourable answer to Jocelyn Loftus, so that he may without delay present his homage to your Royal Highness.

" He is at present residing at the house of Doctor Maravelli, a physician and surgeon in the suburb of ———

" In conclusion, he begs that under no circumstances will your Royal Highness permit yourself to be prejudiced against him, no matter from whose lips hostile or calumniating representations may come, for Jocelyn Loftus will be enabled to prove that his motives are utterly free from selfishness, his character unimpeachable, the persecutions he has endured most undeserved, and his aims and objects entirely in the interest of your Royal Highness.

" *Geneva, May 12, 1815.*"

Such were the lines written inside the envelope, and which the three sisters now hastily scanned with frightened looks, blanching cheeks, and palpitating hearts.

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Agatha, in consternation. "Loftus is at Maravelli's — Ah! and now I understand," she half-shrieked forth, as a sudden reminiscence struck her.

"What do you understand?" asked Emma and Julia, both in a breath.

"That allusion which Lady Prescott made," returned Agatha. "Oh, I felt at the time it was something more than a mere random retort, that it was a deliberate taunt flung out full of malignant significancy."

"But how is it possible she can suspect what has happened to you?" demanded Emma, who, as well as Julia, had caught the infection of Agatha's dismay.

"Oh, Maravelli must have penetrated the whole truth," exclaimed Agatha, wringing her hands in despair. "Instead of believing that it was the princess whom he delivered, he must have known that it was me. And he is not making a secret of it, he has told it to Loftus, Loftus has told it to this Lady Prescott, and now Bergami will go and find it all out. O God! exposure is imminent, ruin hangs over our heads!"

Clasping her white hands in despair, the unhappy young lady threw herself upon a sofa in the bedchamber, and gave way to an effusion of the wildest anguish. Julia became equally terrified, and though Emma could not but feel all the danger of her eldest sister's position, and also of her own and Julia's as accomplices in the concealment of the childbirth, she nevertheless showed more presence of mind than they on this trying occasion. She accordingly hurried to Mrs. Ranger's room, where she found that lady very busy in examining a new set of false teeth which had just been sent home by a famous dentist in Geneva. But the hag speedily forgot all about her artificial embellishments when the affrighted Emma hastily sketched the outline of what had occurred within the last hour, and the fearful results which might ensue.

Accompanying Emma to the chamber where Agatha and Julia were sitting in despair upon the sofa, Mrs. Ranger urged them to collect all their fortitude and presence of

mind, so that they might look the present danger boldly in the face if they meant to grapple with it at all.

The old woman and the three young ladies now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate upon the course that was to be pursued, but the more they weighed the perils of their position, the darker seemed the storm-clouds that were gathering around them.

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Ranger, suddenly adopting an air of such stern decision that this nervous, frivolous, affected old woman seemed in a moment to rise high above all her assumed weaknesses and trumpery vanities when the gravity of the occasion demanded the development of her best energies, "now, girls, there is no use in mincing matters, and we must see exactly how we stand. Loftus is our evil genius; he is at Geneva, and the devil has thrown him in the way of Maravelli. They are together, and it is pretty certain that Maravelli has sold our secret to him. Depend upon it, he will ferret out everything, — your accouchement, Agatha, the disposal of the child, and all. Then, even if he should be inclined to show mercy and spare us, that woman whom you have made your mortal enemy — this Lady Prescott, I mean — will expose us pitilessly. This is natural; it will be tit for tat, a woman's vengeance. Well, then, what follows? Concealment of birth is a crime of magnitude in the Genevese republic, — at least two years' imprisonment for the principal, that is yourself, Agatha, and eighteen months for your two sisters and me, besides utter ruin and eternal disgrace for us all. This is the position we are in, and those are the perils which now stare us in the face."

"Good heavens!" murmured the three sisters, clasping their hands, "what is to be done? What is to be done?"

The reader beheld them in the morning, gay, bright, and beautiful, as they stood in the balcony, calling themselves graces and goddesses, and now he may behold them within the walls of that chamber, pale, trembling, convulsed, indeed, from head to foot with the crucifixion of anguish, and suffering mental agonies so acute that even to endure them for a few minutes would appear almost sufficient to turn those dark brown masses of hair silver-white, dim all the lustre of those fine hazel eyes, and render those damask cheeks wrinkled, haggard, and ghastly.

"What is to be done? What is to be done?" they re-

peated, addressing their words in the most piteous accents to Mrs. Ranger, and it was as if three despairing beauties were adjuring some withered witch to work her spells on their behalf.

"What is to be done?" said Mrs. Ranger. "What is to be done?" she repeated, slowly and deliberately. Then suddenly fixing her eyes upon the three young ladies with a look which had a horrible fascination in it, she said, in a deep tone but with accents that trembled not, "Murder must be done, if we would save ourselves."

The three girls, who had been leaning forward, hanging, as it were, upon the slightest syllable to which the hag was to give utterance, started suddenly back as if she had changed all in a moment into a hideous reptile from which they recoiled loathingly, and though ejaculations of horror seemed to waver upon their lips, yet were they stifled ere sent forth.

"Yes, I mean what I say," continued Mrs. Ranger. "But I am not going to ask you to do the murderous deed. No, this Loftus and that Lady Prescott must be removed from our path; but it is Maravelli upon whose fears I will work — yes, 'tis Maravelli," she added, emphatically, "who shall become the executioner for us."

With these words Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat, her eyes remaining fixed with a cold, glistening, reptile-like gaze upon the three girls, who, horror-stricken and dismayed, were huddling together as if in the presence of some spectral shape.

Then, having thus gazed as if to convince them that she was inspired with all the energy now needed for the working out of her desperate plans, Mrs. Ranger hurried from the room with a step as light and swift as that of youthfulness itself, and as the door closed behind her, the three sisters slowly turned their eyes upon each other with looks expressive of a horror beyond all power of description.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CRIME DEBATED

Stern, resolute, and implacable in the purpose she had formed, Mrs. Ranger betook herself direct to the city, and on reaching the neighbourhood of Maravelli's abode, she entered a wine-shop, answering to the description of a London public-house, and desired to be shown to a private apartment. This demand was immediately complied with, and having ordered refreshments, for the sake of appearances, — though Heaven knows she was in no humour to eat, — she likewise directed writing materials to be brought up. Then, having penned a hasty note to Maravelli, she despatched it by the waiter of the wine-shop, whom she charged to answer no questions which might be put to him by any person save the doctor himself.

The man departed to execute his commission, and in ten minutes he returned, followed by Doctor Maravelli, whom he had found at home and who at once hastened to obey Mrs. Ranger's summons.

"My dear madam," said the physician, who had scarcely been able to conceal his agitation in the presence of the waiter, and who now gave free vent to his alarms the moment that individual had quitted the room, "what, in Heaven's name, means this mysterious proceeding? Why not come direct to my house, as usual? Why send for me hither? Ah! madam, a terrible presentiment of evil hangs upon my soul."

"Sit down, sit down," said Mrs. Ranger, whose looks denoted a dark and sinister resolution. "We have much to talk about."

"Good God! your tone and manner frighten me," said Maravelli, sinking upon a seat, as if in a state of exhaustion.

"Would to Heaven I never had anything to do with that business!" and the wretched man writhed in agony upon the chair which he had just taken.

"Fool, idiot, coward!" said Mrs. Ranger, in the thick, husky voice of subdued passion and contempt. "Is it thus that you show a worse than woman's weakness in the presence of tremendous dangers?" and as she spoke she grasped his arm with her bony fingers, and griped it with a force as if it were in an iron vice.

"Dangers!" repeated the wretched man, shuddering with the very endeavour which he made to control his fears. "Ah! I knew there were dangers. I knew it, I knew it, the moment I received your note, so mysteriously sent, and so imperatively summoning me hither."

"Yes, there are dangers," returned Mrs. Ranger, her voice suddenly changing fom the huskiness of passion to the sepulchral depth of solemnity. "But if you are a man, and will show a man's courage, we can avert those perils, whereas if you are weak-minded and show a craven spirit, ruin will overwhelm us all, not ruin for one, but ruin for two, three, all, all concerned. Now do you understand me, and will you be calm?"

"I will, I will," said the doctor.

At this moment the waiter reëntered the room, bearing refreshments and wine, and when he had retired again, Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat and examined the apartment carefully to see whether the walls were merely wooden partitions, or whether they were indeed thick enough to prevent their voices from being overheard in the adjoining rooms. Having satisfied herself on this head, she opened the door gently and looked forth into the passage, but no one was there. Thus convinced that there were no eavesdroppers, she returned to her seat at the table, where Maravelli was just tossing off a tumbler of wine in order to resuscitate his courage and his spirits.

"Now are you prepared to listen?" asked Mrs. Ranger.

"I am," was the response; and he certainly appeared to have found the fortitude which he sought in the juice of the grape.

"Take another glass," said Mrs. Ranger, who saw that the artificial stimulant would render him ductile and pliable

to her purpose, more easily, perhaps, than even her own representations.

"There, now proceed," said the doctor, setting down the tumbler which he had emptied a second time. "I am prepared for something dreadful. Your look, your manner, your tone of voice, already seem to shadow forth some idea of a terrific nature."

"You are aware, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, "that dangers do menace us, you knew it even before you received my note, and it was my note that worked you up to a pitch of feverish excitement? Come, confess the truth, was it not so?" and she looked him hard in the face, as much as to say that it were useless to give a denial.

"Yes, you speak truly, too truly," returned the doctor, hesitatingly.

"But you have betrayed the trust reposed in you?" she said, still gazing upon him with an intentness and fixity that seemed resolved not to allow the slightest change of feature on his part to escape her notice.

"What do you mean? Betray you?" he asked, stammering and blushing like a guilty man.

"In one word, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, sternly, and still with that fascinating look fixed upon him, — but fascinating only as the reptile concentrates all the magnetic influence of its cold, gleaming eyes upon the victim it is about to dart upon, — "in one word, you have betrayed all you know to a young Englishman who is living with you, named Jocelyn Loftus?"

"It is useless, utterly useless, nay, even worse than useless," said the doctor, "to deny anything. I will make up my mind to tell you all. Besides, I see that you have some project in view — "

"Remember, doctor, that every minute is precious," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, in a warning voice. "Whatever you have done I will not reproach you for. 'Tis past, and cannot be undone. But it can be amended or counteracted, and in this must you help me. Now proceed, and tell me frankly and candidly all you have said to this Jocelyn Loftus."

Doctor Maravelli thereupon commenced the required explanations. He stated how an English lady, bearing the fictitious name of Roberts, was living at his house, and how,

as she desired change of scene, he had visited the adjacent village to purchase or hire a country residence which he might fit up for her accommodation. He went on to state how he had met Loftus there, how the young man had that same evening rescued Mrs. Roberts from a watery grave, and how he had become an inmate of his house. Then he detailed the particulars of the scene which had taken place between himself and Loftus, and how he had revealed all he knew concerning the incidents of the villa, and likewise Emma Owen's episodical adventure with the police. He next proceeded to describe how, late on the preceding night, Loftus had brought home the corpse of the child, how he had discovered the initials on the flannel wrapper and the cambric handkerchief, and how he had deposited the body in the dissecting-room.

Mrs. Ranger was appalled at the narrative now revealed to her, and which showed how far advanced Jocelyn Loftus was in following up the clue that he was evidently pursuing to the unravelment of the whole complicated affair relative to the birth of the child. But composing her harrowed feelings, and recalling to her aid that more than feminine and even more than masculine resolution with which in her own criminal designs she had previously armed herself, she reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute upon all she had just heard.

"Do you know what this self-styled Mrs. Roberts real name is?" she inquired, at length.

"No," replied Maravelli, "but she has told me that she is a lady of rank, and that she until recently held a situation at the English court. She is a fine, handsome woman, five months advanced in pregnancy —"

"Ah! then it is evidently Lady Prescott," said Mrs. Ranger. "Though I have never seen her ladyship, yet, all things considered, she it must be. Did you notice whether she has been out this morning?"

"Yes, she was absent for upwards of an hour," answered the doctor, "and she had not returned more than twenty minutes when your note was delivered at my house. She looked agitated —"

"Ah! it is the same, then," ejaculated Mrs. Ranger. "A deep, mysterious understanding exists between her and Jocelyn Loftus."

" Methought so," exclaimed the doctor, " for this morning they were alone together in the drawing-room with writing materials, before she went out, and immediately she returned he was evidently waiting about in the hall to receive her."

" Has any visitor called for Mr. Loftus within the last half-hour? " inquired Mrs. Ranger, now thinking of Bergami.

" Yes, a few minutes before your note came," and the physician proceeded to give a description of the royal equerry. " This individual," he added, " was closeted with Mr. Loftus at the moment I left my house. But now, for Heaven's sake, relieve my impatience and tell me what mean all these questions? What has been found out. What perils menace us? "

" Answer me one query first," said Mrs. Ranger. Then fixing her eyes steadily and searchingly upon the doctor, she asked, " Who do you now believe was the mother of that child? "

" From what Mr. Loftus said, and considering all the evidences," answered Maravelli, " I can no longer believe that the princess — "

" Enough! Well, it is useless to sustain the cheat any longer. No, it is useless! Instead of studying how to implicate the princess," she continued, in a musing tone, " the Owens and I must think how we are best to get out of this scrape. Doctor," she went on to say, " Agatha Owen, the eldest of the three sisters, was your patient on that night when upwards of three weeks ago you were introduced to the villa. It matters not now to explain why a cheat was practised on you, and wherefore it was sought to make you believe that it was the princess herself whom you were engaged to assist through the ordeal of maternity."

" But the dangers which menace us, what of them? " asked Maravelli, his impatience, or, rather, his terrors, now once more rising to a feverish pitch. " Who was that handsome man who came ere now to call upon Mr. Loftus? He gave no name, but introduced himself as one having important business."

" It is the Baron Bergami, the princess's equerry," answered Mrs. Ranger. " Have you never seen him before? "

" Methought I recollected his features, but I was not sure," answered Maravelli. " I have been so agitated all

the morning, so full of misgivings and apprehensions after that fearful incident of last night, — I mean the bringing home of that child's corpse, — that my brain has been clouded and my recollections all thrown into disorder. Yes, now I remember, I have seen that handsome man at a distance on one occasion, following the princess's retinue. But what, in Heaven's name, does he seek with Loftus? "

" Lady Prescott, that is, your Mrs. Roberts," resumed Mrs. Ranger, " has been to the villa this morning."

" And all is discovered, all is exposed? " exclaimed Maravelli, trembling from head to foot.

" Yes — no — that is, it will be, and ruin must overtake us all — "

" Then what is to be done? " interrupted Maravelli.

" Hush! not so loud, we shall be overheard."

" But let us fly, let us fly! " hastily resumed the frightened physician. " We will depart together. I will help you to escape, for escape we must. Do you know the penalties which we have incurred? I, branding, yes, branding with a red-hot iron — O God! searing deep down into the flesh, besides imprisonment, and you imprisonment also, and those three girls — oh, it is too horrible to contemplate. Let us fly."

" Fly! Coward, fool! " said Mrs. Ranger, again making use of those epithets of scorn, and again speaking in a voice that was thick and husky. " Whither can we fly? Must we not go with passports? Should we not be traced, pursued, overtaken? "

" True — my God! too true," groaned Maravelli, now wringing his hands in despair.

" Will you be calm? " asked Mrs. Ranger, once more griping him by the wrist, but now shaking him violently. " Look you, I am not cast down, I am not yielding to despair. And why? Because I know that, desperate as are the perils which menace us, they may be averted, counteracted. The game is not altogether in the hands of our enemies. We can yet play it out for ourselves, ay, and win it, too," she added, with a malignant leer.

" Oh, if this be really true? " said Maravelli, clasping in hopefulness the hands which he had a few moments back wrung in despair. " But what makes you think that the dangers can be averted? "

" Because," replied Mrs. Ranger, in a tone of assurance, " I can penetrate to a certain extent the policy which Loftus is pursuing. He does not mean to expose and ruin us fully, unless as a last resource, but he purposes to intimidate, to terrify — "

" Yes, I see;" exclaimed the doctor. " If he had really meant mischief he would at once have gone to the police authorities and told all he knew. But what guarantee have we that he will not do so even now before we can possibly adopt any counteractive plan? "

" Rest assured," returned Mrs. Ranger, " that Jocelyn will do nothing of a decisive character for the present moment. Bergami is now with him, you say? Well, there will be consultations, negotiations, intimidations, and so forth. These will spread over some hours. It is now nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, night is not very far distant, and when night does arrive — "

But here Mrs. Ranger stopped short, and her looks simultaneously became so awfully sinister and darkly significant that Maravelli shuddered as if the words which she had yet to speak were already spoken.

" This night? " he murmured, in a scarcely audible voice.

" Yes, this night, Loftus and Lady Prescott must die," rejoined Mrs. Ranger, in a low, deep tone.

" Is there nothing else to be done but that? " asked Maravelli, whose voice had now sunk to a whisper.

" Nothing! " replied the dreadful woman, who was thus inciting him to a deed of darkest horror. " If you would escape branding with a red-hot iron — "

" Enough! " murmured Maravelli, writhing. " I do indeed comprehend that there is no alternative. But Bergami — "

" Leave him to me," answered Mrs. Ranger. " You do your part of the work and I will do mine. Let Loftus and Lady Prescott die this night — mind, this night that is coming, without fail, and I promise that never again shall you hear a syllable of these startling things. Surely you have some subtle poison which you can cunningly mingle with their drink? "

" There are many ways of dealing death," answered Maravelli, " and you may rest assured that I shall adopt the one that is safest."

"Then hasten back now to your own abode," said Mrs. Ranger, "and again I say, if you wish to avoid the searing-iron, flinch not, fail not."

"Loftus and the English lady have but a few hours to live," replied Maravelli, throwing upon Mrs. Ranger a look full of the darkest and most ominous meaning.

He then took his departure from the wine-shop, and Mrs. Ranger likewise issued forth at the expiration of about five minutes. But although she returned in the direction of the villa, she did not immediately reënter it, but walked about at a little distance and in a spot where she might observe the two or three approaches from the city, namely, the main road that passed in front of the house, the shore of the lake, and the by-road which led at the back through the fields, so that she knew that Baron Bergami could not posssibly return to the villa unperceived by her, unless, indeed, he remained out till it was dark. But this she did not anticipate. Astute, deep, and penetrating, she calculated that Bergami would hear from Jocelyn all that the latter had to say, that they would then confer deliberately upon the course to be adopted under the circumstances, but that whatever was resolved upon would be with a view of avoiding scandal and exposure as much as possible for all parties. Mrs. Ranger therefore felt tolerably well assured that after Bergami had seen Loftus he would return direct to the villa, and under this impression was it that she now waited to intercept him in the manner described.

But in the interval we must see what was really taking place between the royal equerry and Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CONFESSION OF ROMANTIC LOVE

Our hero was in earnest conversation with Lady Prescott, whom we shall no longer call Mrs. Roberts, in the drawing-room at the physician's house, when a servant entered to announce that a gentleman desired to see him on the most particular business. Thereupon Lady Prescott said, "You had better see him here, whoever he may be, for indeed I have a presentiment that it is some one from the royal villa. I will repair in the meantime to Mrs. Montague's chamber and have a conversation with her."

Lady Prescott used the name of Mrs. Montague because she did not know that Jocelyn was aware who this said Mrs. Montague really was. But the truth is that the moment he had seen her that morning he did recognize her, for he had beheld her on the mimic stage that night when circumstances made him a spectator of the private theatricals at Carlton House. But the self-styled Mrs. Montague herself did not know Jocelyn Loftus, nor had she noticed him amongst the spectators, concealed as he was under the gallery, on the occasion referred to. Of course Jocelyn had not appeared to recognize her, but had passed through the ceremony of introduction (which was performed by Lady Prescott) with every semblance of being a perfect stranger and entirely ignorant who she really was. Nevertheless, we must add he had been much astonished at beholding that lady as an inmate of Doctor Maravelli's house.

Having parenthetically recorded these few but necessary observations, we may return to the thread of our narrative.

Jocelyn Loftus, acting upon Lady Prescott's suggestion, desired the servant to show up the gentleman at once, while her ladyship repaired to the chamber of Mrs. Montague.

In a few minutes Baron Bergami was introduced, and on announcing his name, he was welcomed with becoming courtesy by our young hero.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales has commanded me to seek you, Mr. Loftus," began the equerry, "for the purpose of conferring with you."

"In pursuance of the letter which I wrote, and the one which mine enclosed?" said Loftus, whose joy at the progressive success of his plans rendered him impatient to enter upon the requisite explanations.

"The one which you wrote!" observed Baron Bergami, in surprise. Then instantaneously recollecting how Agatha Owen had picked up the envelope, he exclaimed, with an unwonted degree of excitement, "Ah! I understand. You must have written on the paper serving as the envelope of the epistle from the Princess Sophia?"

"I did so," rejoined Loftus, "for I was fearful that if there were several enclosures one might so easily drop or be mislaid."

"Then what you partially apprehended did really occur," continued the baron, "for the envelope was dropped unread, picked up by Miss Agatha Owen, and taken away by her."

"Ah! then perhaps you are unacquainted with its contents?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly; and as Bergami nodded an affirmative to the question, he proceeded to state exactly what he had written in the envelope.

"Now Mr. Loftus," said Bergami, "you will pardon me for telling you, at the very outset of our interview, that your character has been much blackened in the opinion of the Princess of Wales; and this evil impression which she has conceived was not improved ere now by the appearance of Lady Prescott as your messenger, inasmuch as she is in a condition —"

"I have indeed learned from her ladyship's lips how cruelly she was exposed," said Jocelyn. "It may appear indiscreet, improper, and even indecent for me to have entrusted my mission to her ladyship under the circumstances, but I felt assured that I myself could not obtain access to her Royal Highness, I knew not how to forward the Princess Sophia's letter to her with the certainty that it would reach her own hands, and when you have heard all I am about to narrate, you will admit, Baron Bergami, that

the affair is of an importance too grave and too vital to have allowed me to hesitate at any punctilio or formality in my endeavour to convey that document direct to the princess. As for the aspersions on my own character, you shall presently judge of what value they are and what faith is to be put in them."

Jocelyn Loftus then proceeded, circumstantially and minutely, to relate all that he had discovered, all that he had done, all that he had endured, and all that he now proposed to do, in respect to the affairs of the Princess of Wales. He began by stating who he really was, wherefore he had adopted a fictitious name, and why he had abjured his real one. He went on to explain how he had first fallen in with Mary Owen, from whose lips he learned all the particulars of the conspiracy existing against the Princess of Wales, how he had accompanied Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen from Calais to Paris, how he had been the object of their licentious advances, how he had been imprisoned in the prefecture, where Julia had practised her arts under the name of Laura Linden, how he had been rescued from his captivity, how he had returned to England and procured the letter of introduction from the Princess Sophia, how he had set off on a second expedition to the Continent, but had been arrested and imprisoned at Grenoble until within the last few days, how, on obtaining his release, he had sped toward Geneva, and how he had fallen in with Lady Prescott, which circumstance had led to his taking up his abode at Doctor Maravelli's house.

Of course he delicately suppressed the fact that Lady Prescott had attempted self-destruction, and without committing himself to an untruth, he glanced over the event in such a manner which left Bergami to surmise that it was an accidental fall into the water. Continuing his narrative, he related the startling things which he had learned and which had happened since his arrival beneath the physician's roof, describing all that he had elicited from Maravelli, the fishing up of the dead child, and the telltale initials on the flannel wrapper and the cambric handkerchief.

To say that Bergami was amazed, were to say nothing, but to describe him as passing through a strange series of exciting phases of feeling, as Jocelyn successively developed

the incidents of his narrative, were to convey a better idea of the effect which it produced on the equerry. But some parts of the disclosure struck him as if a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet, filling him with stupor and amazement, while others made his blood boil with indignation, and others, again, filled him with horror and dismay. The veil of a tremendous mystery had been drawn aside, and the things that it revealed were startling, surprising, hideous, exciting, revolting, and monstrous to a degree. That the meshes of a dark, deep, damnable conspiracy had been insidiously woven about the Princess of Wales was clear enough; that the three Misses Owen, beneath the air of sprightliness, affability, and good-humour, concealed the blackest hearts, the worst passions, and the most dissolute lives, was also evident; and that they had with a truly fiendlike cunning and with the most exquisite combination of a demoniac duplicity managed to throw upon the princess all the scandal of their own actions was not the less apparent. But while passing through the various stages of successive emotions produced by the fearful narrative which had just been developed, Baron Bergami had experienced an undercurrent of feeling made up of admiration for the excellent young man who had so heroically, so generously, and so nobly devoted himself to the cause of the injured Princess of Wales.

"In the name of her Royal Highness, Mr. Loftus, since by that name you choose to be called," said the baron, "do I thank you, most sincerely, most profoundly, for this chivalrous conduct on your part. Had it not been for you, the fatal web of the most infernal conspiracy the world ever saw would have been so woven about this injured princess that the aims of her enemies must have been triumphantly accomplished in ensuring her disgrace, ruin, and downfall. To you, then, she now owes everything, her honour, which is dearer to her than her life. Pardon me, pardon me, if I speak in terms of excitement, but it is because I am inspired with an enthusiastic admiration of your conduct that I thus give utterance to my feelings."

"I have told you candidly, Baron Bergami," said Loftus, after a few suitable words in acknowledgment of the thanks tendered him by the royal equerry, "that scandal, not content with attributing to her Royal Highness all the profli-

gacies whereof the three sisters have been guilty, has coupled your name with the princess's."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the royal equerry, starting from his seat with indignation and excitement, "no calumny can be more foul, no slander more detestable. Ah! Mr. Loftus, that I have loved her," he continued, "is but too true. When a mere youth, I was appointed secretary to the Prussian envoy at the Court of Brunswick. In the chapel at the ducal palace did I behold the Princess Caroline for the first time, and I believe there can be no sin in confessing that she made a deep impression upon my heart. I loved her, and my love grew into a worship, intense, profound, yet delicate and pure and holy as the love of angels. I thought not of her as a woman, but as a being of a nature infinitely superior to my own. I loved her, in fine, as a visionary may love a shadowy sylph or spiritual wood-nymph in the depths of the forest. That she comprehended my passion is beyond all doubt, and that she reciprocated it, too," continued Bergami, his voice, which was so fine in its masculine melody, now gradually sinking to the lowest flutelike innotations, "is likewise certain. On one occasion she dropped a flower from the ducal pew in the chapel at Brunswick. I picked it up, and placed it next to my heart. No one beheld this little incident, — or, at all events, no one attached any importance to it, save herself, and in her looks, in the blushes too, which rose upon her cheeks, did I read the sentiment of pleasure which this proof of my devotion excited in her heart. Without reflecting on the consequences, without pausing to remember that she never could be mine, and that this love-worship on my part could only lead to misery, disappointment, and despair, I continued to pursue my path of infatuation. I lived only for the moment, and if that moment were filled with the bliss of her image, and lighted by the soft glory of her smile, I cared not what change the next might bring. When I say care not, I am wrong; I should have said, thought not. I was fascinated, enchanted; a spell was upon me. It was not that my vanity was flattered in being thus tenderly noticed by a princess. No, because I boasted of it to no one; it was my own secret. I cherished it in my heart of hearts, enshrined it as the idol of my worship in the sanctuary of my soul. Then, I will not say with the folly of a youthful lover who fancies himself

a poet, because there can be no folly where the sentiment is so pure, so refined, so devoid of selfishness as that which I cherished, but I will say with the indiscretion of a young adorer who pours forth a natural worship to his divinity, I embodied all I felt in rapturous, glowing verse, For, ah! poetry is the language of nature; it is from every grand as well as from every pleasing, interesting, and touching feature in the natural world that the poet drinks in his inspirations. Oh, believe me, he could not create a world of his own from the efforts of imagination unless he were deeply imbued with a sense of all that is sublime, delightful, and lovely in the aspect of nature. For there is poetry in the heavens, when in the gorgeousness of its own light the sun proclaims in golden voice the power of the Eternal, or at night when the moon and stars give forth in silver accents the same adoring hymn. There is poetry in the sea when it speaks in the murmurs of its ripples, or thunders forth in the portentous voice of its sounding billows. There is poetry in the storm, there is poetry in the green fields, the waving woods, and the delicious gardens, and there is poetry of the sublimest and the loftiest character amidst the mountains that rear their heads to heaven, those heads that wear the coronals of eternal snow. Poetry, then, is everywhere; it is the voice in which nature speaks, the mute eloquence which has far more expression and goes more deeply down into the heart than the chorus of ten thousand human tongues. No wonder, then, was it that in the voice of poesy did I seek to convey all those feelings which are so ineffable otherwise. Besides, it was the only manner in which I could communicate with the princess. Nor was it even direct to her that the verses were sent, but it was to one of her ladies in waiting that I enclosed my tender effusions. I knew that this lady's vanity would induce her to show the poems to the princess, and I also knew that the princess would not fail to comprehend them. Nor was I mistaken. The looks with which I was rewarded in the ducal chapel, and the occasional dropping of a flower unperceived by all present save myself, these were the tokens that my verses had been read and were acceptable, these also were my reward."

Here Baron Bergami paused for a few minutes, during which he paced the room in a mood of the deepest abstraction. He forgot who was present, he forgot wherefore he had come

thither, forgot the important topic of discourse whence his own feelings had hurried him divergingly away, forgot everything save the reminiscences which had been thus conjured up, and which came crowding back upon his soul, all absorbing, and with a tenderness that was ineffable. Loftus could not interrupt him, dared not break in upon this reverie, for it was too solemn and sacred for intrusion, although time was now of such importance, and every minute that was slipping away could be so ill spared from earnest deliberation or positive action in the cause of the Princess of Wales.

"This delicious dream," continued Bergami, slowly and mournfully resuming the thread of his discourse, "lasted for nearly eighteen months; and will you believe that during this period never once did I speak to the princess, never were we near enough to each other to exchange a single syllable? I was but the secretary to a second-rate diplomatic agent at a proud court, and although my rank is noble, yet was I never invited as a guest to the ducal table. Suddenly the intelligence began to be whispered about in Brunswick that negotiations had been opened with the British court relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Then was I immediately ordered by the Prussian government to quit Brunswick and repair to Vienna, to take the post of secretary to the Prussian legation in that city. By some means the romantic attachment which had sprung up between myself and the princess had become either whispered about or else suspected, and hence my sudden removal to Vienna. Then did I awake from this long dream of bliss, awake to find that I had been clinging to a shadow, immolating my happiness on an ideal altar. Bitterly did I curse my folly in having given way to such a delusion, and yet a delusion it scarcely can be called, for though I had loved so tenderly and had evidently been loved in return, I had not cherished any definite hope. Indeed, I had never thought of asking myself why I loved and to what I expected my love would lead. Thus I had not deluded myself, and assuredly the princess had not deluded me. But I will not attempt to analyze the feelings which I experienced when thus abruptly removed from the Court of Brunswick. I may, however, mention that I at once resolved to renounce

all idea of obtruding myself upon the princess's notice again. Indeed, I prayed, fervently prayed, that she might forget me, so as to be enabled to give up her thoughts wholly and undividedly to the husband whom expediency and diplomacy had selected for her. I heard of her marriage; next I heard that she was unhappy; then I heard that she had given birth to a daughter, and that even this circumstance had failed to endear her royal husband to her. Years and years elapsed. I had opportunities of pushing my way in the world, but my mind had grown too unsettled to allow me to take advantage of them. I abandoned my diplomatic career and joined the Prussian army. Without vanity I can say that the credentials I possess are those of which any military man may be proud. In a short time I rose to the rank of captain, and fought in all the dread campaigns in which Prussia bore her part against Napoleon. But if I had abandoned the seclusion of the diplomatic cabinet in order to fly from thought, I assuredly had gained nothing by the change, for my pursuer followed me through all the mazes of war, even into the ranks of battle. At length the abdication of Napoleon at Fontainebleau and his retirement to Elba gave a short peace to Europe, — that peace which is now to be disturbed again by the wild ambition of this meteor-man whom it is impossible not to admire and gaze up to as the mightiest of warriors, the greatest of heroes, and the grandest of emperors. Quitting the army at the time of the abdication, I visited Italy for my amusement, and some months ago I was suddenly startled by the intelligence that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was travelling in the same country, and was indeed daily expected at the same city where I then was. I was now seized with feelings which I cannot attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that I was impelled by an irresistible power to see the princess. Against this impulse I struggled for several days, but it grew stronger than myself, and, yielding to it, I proceeded to the hotel at which she had taken up her quarters. On sending up my card, I was at once admitted to her presence, and she received me with a frank affability and a warm-hearted candour which seemed to say as plainly as looks and actions can possibly have a meaning, ' I receive you as an old friend. In the name of friendship, welcome. There must be an eternal silence, if not oblivion, with regard to that episode

in our lives which dates more than twenty years back.' I understood her meaning, and a great change was suddenly worked within me. Instead of the restlessness of a disappointed passion, I felt as if I had drunk of the holiest balm of Christian resignation. An anodyne had been all in a moment administered to a heart the wound of which for long years had remained open. Friendship! — to possess the friendship of the princess would now be more than a recompense for all that I had endured; it would make me happy. She appeared to be animated with exactly the same feelings, and treating me in the light of a friend, she inquired what I was doing, how I was engaged, what were my pursuits, and then delicately touched upon my means of existence. With equal candour did I answer her, making her aware that I had nothing but my half-pay as a Prussian officer, and a small pension which I had received in acknowledgment of services rendered during the war. Thereupon she proposed that I should enter her service as principal equerry, that office being at the moment vacant. I accepted the offer, accepted it at once, because it was made so frankly and so kindly. To have refused it, I must have stated some reason, and as I was poor, out of employment, and totally disengaged, I could invent no excuse of a legitimate character. Much less dared I confess that, having loved her in my earlier years, having loved her, too, ever since, and having continued unmarried in order to remain faithful to that romantic love of mine, I dared not accept a post which would constantly retain me about her person. Under these circumstances, therefore, and impelled by such considerations, I at once replied in the affirmative; and behold me installed as equerry in the establishment of that princess whose image had dwelt in my heart for more than twenty years. Now, candidly speaking, Mr. Loftus, I will admit that there was possibly some little indiscretion — "

" Pardon me for interrupting you, Baron Bergami," said our hero, " but I think that you have exculpated yourself from any blame, even the slightest, in respect to taking office in the household of the princess. But that her Royal Highness was somewhat indiscreet in making the proposal to you, I certainly think."

" Consider, Mr. Loftus, that she is of the most artless, unsuspecting disposition," exclaimed Bergami. " Harbour-

ing no guile herself, she is never the first to look for it elsewhere, and her very candour and frankness frequently make her the creature of impulse, so that she is thoughtless in her actions. But, Mr. Loftus," added Bergami, suddenly drawing himself up to his full height and gazing upon our hero with a look of noble ingenuousness, " you will believe me when, as a man of honour, a nobleman, and an officer, I declare unto you that never since I have thus been in the service of her Royal Highness has a single look or word passed between us in any way calculated to revive the memories of the past. Whatever may be felt in either heart is profoundly concealed; nor have I the vanity to suppose that the romantic love of the princess has survived the period when it was characterized by so many singular but delicate traits at the ducal palace at Brunswick. Of this, however, enough. You believe, Mr. Loftus, my solemn word? "

" You need not, Baron Bergami," exclaimed our hero, " do such violence to your own feelings as to enter upon self-vindication in this respect. As for her Royal Highness, not for a moment is it necessary that you should repudiate on her behalf all the vile scandals and atrocious calumnies which have recently been propagated concerning her. From what I have this day narrated, and from all that I have succeeded in learning since the moment I set foot in Geneva, it is clear enough that those three fiends in angel shapes, and bearing the name of Owen, are the authoresses of the scandal, the guilt, and the infamy."

" Yes, true, too true," said Bergami. " But how do you propose to proceed in vindicating her Royal Highness, and punishing the guilty ones? "

" In order to unmask the conspiracy," returned Jocelyn, " we must obtain a thorough insight into all its details, so that every single point at all affecting the character of the princess may be fully cleared up. Now then, let us see what it is that scandal alleges against her. In the first place, it is averred that she has been secretly delivered of a child, but this we shall assuredly be enabled to bring home to Agatha Owen. Secondly, it is declared by calumny that the princess has received several lovers into the villa, but we shall prove that these gallants have been invited thither by the Misses Owen. Thirdly, the tongue of scandal affirms

that her Royal Highness has intrigued with you, Baron Bergami, and that you have been seen proceeding along the passage in the villa at night-time to her Royal Highness's apartment. This point we are not as yet in a condition to clear up. That we know the allegation to be false is one thing, but to make the world believe it so is another. That the scandalous imputation emanates from the Owens, there is no doubt. With them, too, is leagued that mother of crime, Mrs. Ranger, and she appears to have an accomplice in Mrs. Hubbard, who, as I have already told you, bore her part in the adventures of that night when Maravelli was introduced to the villa. It were well then, baron, if you were to demand explanations of this Mrs. Hubbard, and compel her to confess all she knows."

"I will do so," answered Bergami.

"Perhaps," continued Loftus, "her revelations may throw some further light upon the subject. At all events, you have too much sensibility, delicacy, and good taste not to feel how important it is that the particular allegation relative to the princess and yourself should be cleared up."

"I do indeed appreciate the justice and the good sense of all you say, Mr. Loftus," responded Bergami, "and, depend upon it, I will do my best to exonerate her Royal Highness from that gross and scandalous imputation."

"In this respect, then, I must leave you to act according to circumstances," said Loftus. "Meanwhile I shall not remain idle. For you must understand that although we have every reason to suppose it was indeed Agatha Owen who gave birth to the child, we are not yet in a condition fully to prove it. That her sister Emma disposed of the corpse in the lake is beyond all doubt, and that it was wrapped in a garment belonging to Agatha is equally certain. But still these evidences do not place the main point beyond all doubt. It might still be alleged that as the Misses Owen were in the confidence of the princess, those little circumstances just mentioned were natural enough. It is therefore necessary to obtain a confession from the lips of the sisters, and this cannot be elicited from them by suasion or remonstrance, no, nor even by mere threats and menaces of exposure. All these they have no doubt firmly made up their minds to dare and defy. It can therefore only be under extraordinary circumstances of terror, best cal-

culated to make a sudden and awful impression upon the mind, to give the mind, indeed, a sudden shock, and unnerve it by the abrupt development of a spectacle of horror, — it is only by such means as these, I say, that a full and complete confession can be extorted from the lips of those three depraved and heartless young women. Now, Baron Bergami, do you begin to understand why I have retained the loathsome corpse of that child beneath this roof, why I have deposited it in the dissecting-room as the most fitting place for such an object to be viewed? "

" Yes, I understand your motives now," answered Bergami. " You purpose by some means or other to entice the three sisters hither."

" Such is my object," replied Loftus. " Had I personally been sent for by the princess to-day, as I had hoped would be the result of Lady Prescott's visit, I should have contented myself for the moment by revealing to her Royal Highness enough to place her at once upon her guard as a preliminary to the complete revelation of all details when my plans are matured. I should then have sought a secret opportunity of inducing the three sisters, by means of dark and mysterious threats, to come to Doctor Maravelli's house this night. But now, from the turn which events have taken, these results must be brought about through other means. In plain terms, Baron Bergami, it is now for you to enter actively into coöperation with me in carrying out my aims. To you, then, must I entrust the task of inducing or compelling the three sisters, Agatha, Emma, and Julia, to come hither this night! "

" I will do so," was Bergami's prompt reply.

" Good! " ejaculated Loftus. " Now then, let us understand each other thoroughly. At midnight punctually the three sisters must be at the front door of this house, for midnight is the hour when the mind, by a variety of influences and associations, is most sensitive to the overpowering effect of circumstances of horror."

" At midnight," rejoined Bergami, " those three young women shall be at the front door of Maravelli's house, — at least, so far as it will depend upon myself to urge, coerce, or persuade them. As a matter of course, no means must be left untried. If I find that they are more accessible to cajolery than to threats, I will use the former; but, at

all events, I will do my best to ensure their presence here."

"I shall rely upon you," said Loftus, "for remember how much depends upon the success of this feature in our plan, and how vitally important it is to wring from those girls the whole truth relative to the child, so as to relieve the character of the princess from so serious an aspersion."

"I appreciate and understand all you say," remarked Bergami, "and I shall now speed back to the villa to perform the part which you have entrusted to me."

"But be careful, baron," said Loftus, "in what you may reveal to the princess. It would be unwise to tell her everything at once. These are things that should only be broken by degrees, for they are but too well calculated to prove overpowering to a sensitive mind."

"This suggestion on your part shall I also follow," said Bergami. "Indeed, I will so manage matters that the princess shall not at once be plunged into an inordinate degree of excitement. Moreover, it will perhaps be as well that the Misses Owen should not be allowed to perceive how very serious matters are becoming, lest they should hesitate to come this night to Maravelli's house to see you."

After a little additional discourse upon the details of the plan now in execution, Baron Bergami took his leave of Jocelyn Loftus, and, quitting the house, he retraced his way in the direction of the villa.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PRINCESS — MRS. HUBBARD

While pursuing his path homeward, the baron was suddenly aroused from a reverie of a deep, absorbing, and painful character by hearing his name mentioned. He looked up, and beheld Mrs. Ranger.

This lady had never been a favourite of Bergami's. Not that he was a man who formed opinions without a motive, or who easily surrendered himself up to prejudices and antipathies, but he certainly had never been inclined to entertain a high opinion of Mrs. Ranger. Now that he had discovered from Jocelyn's revelation that she was a perfect Hecate of iniquity, he recoiled with a sudden sensation of loathing as he thus found himself in her presence. But almost at the selfsame instant did the thought flash to his mind that he might to some extent make use of this woman, in respect to the purpose which he had in view relative to the Owens, and conquering his repugnance accordingly, he acknowledged her salutation.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Ranger immediately saw that the baron felt a loathing at her presence, and that even this act of courtesy which he had just performed, reserved, constrained, and cold as it seemed, was a forced effort and not a spontaneous politeness.

"Something unpleasant has occurred, baron," she said, accosting him in such a manner as to show she desired to lead him into conversation.

"Yes, Mrs. Ranger," responded Bergami, fixing his eyes with a look of deep meaning upon her, "something unpleasant has indeed occurred."

"You have seen Mr. Loftus and Lady Prescott?" asked Mrs. Ranger, eagerly.

" I have not seen Lady Prescott since she was at the villa ere now, but I have seen Mr. Loftus. How knew you that he was at Geneva? "

" Now, baron," said Mrs. Ranger, hastily, " do not let us stand here wasting precious time in asking questions and trying to draw each other out. But tell me at once the amount of mischief that exists and how it may be remedied. Do everything you can to avoid scandal, and I will give my best assistance in any way that lies in my power."

" Well, then, to speak with equal candour," answered Bergami, " I will tell you that there is a considerable amount of mischief suspected and into the depths of which Mr. Loftus and I are determined to penetrate. Your three young friends, the Misses Owen, are implicated."

" Ah! poor dear creatures! " ejaculated Mrs. Ranger. " But remember how young they are, and make allowances for them. You would not seek to ruin them? Spare them; at all events, give them time to reflect upon the atonement they may make for any amount of mischief they have already done."

" Now, Mrs. Ranger," said Bergami, " I do not wish to proceed with unnecessary harshness or precipitation, and I think you are aware of Mr. Loftus's disposition."

" Ah! he is a kind, good, excellent young man," said Mrs. Ranger. " But what does he mean to do? What course is he adopting? Perhaps he believes that the poor girls are far more guilty than they really are? "

" To give you a proof that he does not wish to act with cruel abruptness or unfeeling precipitation," said Bergami, " I will at once inform you that he desires to have an interview with these young ladies, to reason with them, to learn from their own lips the extent of their misdeeds, and to see in what manner scandal may be avoided. In a word, he has consented to see them, and has left it to me to make some appointment with them to that effect."

" Shall I bear a message to them for you, baron? " asked Mrs. Ranger, inwardly chuckling at the certainty which she now acquired that no immediate step was to be taken with regard to the fearful matters wherein she, as well as the Owens, was so mixed up. " Or would you prefer seeing them at once yourself? It were perhaps better — "

" Yes, it would be better," said Bergami, adopting a

musing tone, as if he deliberated upon the point, instead of having already made up his mind to it. Then consulting his watch, he said, " It is now past three o'clock. Tell the young ladies that, in order to avoid unpleasant observation, I will meet them at five punctually on the shore of the lake — near that old jetty which we see yonder," he added, after sweeping his eyes around in search of a specific place of appointment.

" Your message shall be faithfully delivered, and I promise you the girls shall be punctually there. But may I hope, indeed, am I to understand from the remark you have just made, that you do not purpose to vex and annoy our dear princess — "

" Madam," interrupted the baron, sternly, for the mingled hypocrisy and effrontery of the woman was more than he could patiently endure, " you must be well aware that I have learned too much to believe for a single instant that you or the three sisters have any regard, love, or pity for the princess. Nevertheless, madam, I do not object to inform you that it is my intention to deal delicately, warily, and cautiously with her Royal Highness in respect to the terrible things which have come to my knowledge. I will even add that provided the Misses Owen follow in all things the course which I shall presently point out to them, they shall, at least until to-morrow, be guaranteed against exposure to the princess."

" Ah! this is most kind, most considerate on your part," exclaimed Mrs. Ranger. " But, my dear baron, will you not tell me exactly how matters stand — "

" I have no more to say at present," interrupted the royal equerry, with a coldness and sternness that precluded any further observation on the harridan's part. " We are both about returning to the villa," he added, " but there are different paths to reach the same point."

Thereupon he quickly passed Mrs. Ranger by, and hastened along the main road toward the villa, while she took the path across the fields.

For the present we will follow Bergami, who, on reaching the villa, immediately sought the princess, and this was the first time he had found himself alone with her since he had been in her service. She was in a parlour the window of which opened on the lawn in front of the house, and com-

manded a magnificent view of the lake and all the surrounding scenery. But to the beauties of nature her attention was not given, though her eyes were fixed thereon, for the incident of noon had troubled her sorely, and the longer she meditated upon it the greater became her misgivings and her alarms.

"Ah, baron, I am so glad you have returned," she exclaimed, the moment he entered the room. "Having written a long letter to my dearest daughter Charlotte, and another to my sister-in-law Sophia, I came and shut myself up alone in this room to think in solitude. Ah! and thinking is ofttimes so mournful, so sad, especially when aught has arisen to fill the mind with new apprehensions, fresh misgivings. But what have you done? Whom have you seen? Speak, tell me; I am in a flutter of excitement."

"I cannot obey your Royal Highness so speedily," said the baron, with the profoundest respect. "Indeed, considering what I have heard, I think it would be far more prudent if your Royal Highness would restrain your impatience until to-morrow, and then I shall be better enabled — "

"But tell me, am I menaced by any danger?" asked the princess, with a visible tremor.

"No, madam, solemnly and sacredly, no."

"Then is my mind at once set at ease," rejoined the princess, her looks instantaneously brightening up, "and you may either tell me as much as you choose to unveil, or nothing at all, if you prefer I should wait until to-morrow. I know that you are my friend, baron, and therefore I place unlimited confidence in you."

Bergami bowed, saying, in a voice which betrayed the deep emotion that he felt, "Depend upon it, madam, I will never betray the trust with which you honour me."

As he thus spoke, with his looks cast down, a sigh, an ill-subdued and but half-stifled sigh, fell upon his ear, but scarcely more audibly than the seared leaf of autumn, when falling from the tree, kisses the ground beneath, and like that seared leaf cast off from the withering tree was the sigh thus thrown from the princess's heart.

"Then you have seen Lady Prescott again? Or you have seen Mr. Loftus?" she immediately exclaimed, in a hurried manner, and scarcely knowing what she said, so tumultuous

were the feelings which had suddenly arisen up in her soul.

"Yes, madam," responded Bergami, who all in a moment had regained his wonted presence of mind, for he saw the precipice upon which they both stood and hastened by the ceremonial courtesy of his manner to raise up again the barrier of etiquette which had been for an instant borne down by the strong gush of feeling fresh from the heart's fountains. "Yes, madam, I have seen Mr. Loftus, and permit me at once to inform your Royal Highness that a more chivalrous, high-minded young man than he breathes not the air of this world. As for the aspersions thrown out against his character, they are nought but the vilest calumnies."

"Then the Owens have deceived me, and Mrs. Ranger has deceived me?" cried the princess, with mingled anger and amazement.

"You have been deceived, madam, and duped in many, many ways," responded Bergami. "But the crisis is now come, and, thanks to this much maligned but really virtuous and admirable Jocelyn Loftus, your enemies will succumb and you shall achieve a proud triumph. More than this I would rather not say at present, and it were also well if your Royal Highness would assume your usual demeanour, and not allow those around you to perceive that anything extraordinary is taking place."

"I will follow your counsel, baron, in all things," she answered.

Bergami then bowed, and at once quitted the apartment without raising his eyes toward the princess.

Ascending the stairs, he reached the second story and made straight for Mrs. Hubbard's room, where he found her solacing herself with a little drop of brandy after the fatigues of ironing and starching all the morning up in the laundry. On observing the royal equerry, she sprang from her seat, curtseyed, and made a rush at the bottle to hurry it off to the cupboard which stood open behind her; but Bergami, closing the door at once, assumed a stern air, saying, "Put yourself to no trouble, woman, on my account, but answer me the questions I am about to address you."

Mrs. Hubbard was sadly frightened at these words, accompanied by so peremptory and even menacing a manner on the part of Bergami, and sinking back in her seat, she

gazed up at him with a stolid amazement that would have been ludicrous enough if he were in any humour to enjoy it.

But it is not our intention to give at length and in detail all that passed between the baron and Mrs. Hubbard on the present occasion. Suffice it to say that he opened his business with her by the assurance that if she told him the truth in respect to certain matters that had transpired, he would hold her harmless, but if she acted with duplicity or falsehood, he would punish her most severely. Having already suspected from the very first moment Bergami began speaking that his visit was in some way connected with recent occurrences, she grew terribly alarmed, and fell upon her knees, declaring that whatever part she took in the affair of the memorable night three weeks back was through love of the princess, whose honour she wished to save.

Thereupon Bergami bade her rise, made her resume her seat, and ordered her to tell him all she knew. She fell to crying and sobbing, and saying that if she had watched at her door at different times and seen him stealing along the passage at night, it was only because Mrs. Ranger had told her what was going on and had put it into her head thus to play the spy.

It was now Bergami's turn to be astonished, for he knew full well that it was not himself who had been seen creeping stealthily along the passage in the manner described. On questioning and cross-questioning Mrs. Hubbard, he found that she adhered to her story without contradiction or prevarication, and he now began to comprehend that the conspiracy must have had a phase of which he and Jocelyn Loftus had hitherto little dreamed. In plain terms, he saw that somebody must have personated him, in order the more effectually to work out the detestable purpose of involving the princess's reputation in irretrievable ruin.

That he had been so personated by some one was a suspicion speedily confirmed by several little circumstances which he elicited from Mrs. Hubbard. For instance, Mrs. Ranger had never allowed her to peep forth long enough to satisfy herself that the individual personating him really entered the room of the princess; and, moreover, the personator was invariably dressed in a frock coat, never in an evening costume, although it was at night-time when the

said personator was wont to appear. Mrs. Hubbard likewise mentioned that, now she came to think seriously upon the matter, she had more than once fancied at the time that the person whom she took for Baron Bergami always looked shorter than he really was.

But now there was another phase in the tremendous conspiracy which Mrs Hubbard revealed to the baron, and this was that on two occasions when she had been induced by Mrs. Ranger to peep forth from her room, she had seen the princess herself introducing a paramour along the passage. Astonishment for a minute prevented Bergami from uttering a word; but when he was enabled to question her, he found that she consistently and positively pledged herself to having seen her Royal Highness on two consecutive occasions approaching up the passage, in company each time with a male stranger. When asked how she knew it was the princess, Mrs. Hubbard replied that it was because she wore the satin cloak bordered with ermine and the green silk hood which she was wont to put on of an evening, and which it was impossible to mistake.

The baron could scarcely restrain his indignation on hearing these details, which gave him so much more profound an insight into the ramifications of the fearful conspiracy. That he and the princess had alike been personated on different occasions was beyond all question, because not for an instant did he believe that her Royal Highness had been guilty of the thing imputed to her. Indeed, so furious was the rage which boiled up in the breast of Bergami that he could scarcely prevent himself from rushing forth and at once surrendering the three sisters, together with Mrs. Ranger, to the authorities of Geneva. But recollecting how necessary it was to adopt the cautious and prudential course recommended by Jocelyn, he put a curb upon his passion and restrained his feelings as well as he was able.

He saw plainly enough that Mrs. Hubbard was a dupe and not an accomplice, and that Mrs. Ranger and the Owens had so contrived matters, with the most exquisite refinement of satanic ingenuity, as to make her a witness of the supposed guilt of the princess. The baron therefore lost no time in disabusing the woman's mind.

"Mrs. Hubbard," he said, "I came to this apartment under the impression that you were an accomplice in a

fearful conspiracy, but I now perceive that you are its dupe. This conspiracy has been concocted for the ruin of your royal mistress. You have never seen me in the passage, as you state, but some one who has personated me, nor have you ever seen the princess in the condition which you have described, but some one personating her. To such an extent has the fiendlike imaginativeness of these wretches gone. Ah! you may well hold up your hands in amazement, but let me tell you that all is discovered, even to the fact that it was Agatha Owen herself, and not the princess, who gave birth to a child within these walls, — that child whose corpse you have had in your arms. And now I am reminded," added Bergami, " that those two gentlemen whom you saw at Lausanne, Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon, for such were their names, were the paramours of Emma and Julia Owen, and doubtless they were the same two individuals whom you saw introduced to the villa by the wearers of the ermine cloak and silken hood."

Mrs. Hubbard was astounded at all she thus heard, as well indeed she might be; but she was no longer frightened on account of herself, for Bergami's manner had undergone an entire change toward her from the moment he found she was a dupe and not an accomplice. He spoke kindly and encouragingly, reiterating his assurance that no harm should befall her. He also bade her maintain the profoundest silence relative to this interview which he had with her, until the time came when she would be required to speak out and tell all she knew. Mrs. Hubbard promised most faithfully to comply with these instructions, and the baron then took his departure from her chamber, more than ever astounded, afflicted, and indignant at the atrocious measures set on foot to ruin the Princess of Wales.

We must now return to Mrs. Ranger, who in the meantime had also reëntered the villa.

Proceeding straight to the apartment where she had left the sisters two hours before, she found them still there in no very enviable state of mind.

The moment she made her appearance, they started up, rushed toward her, and with their eager looks, more than with their hurried words, showed the intense anxiety which filled their hearts.

"Tranquillize yourselves, girls, tranquillize yourselves," she said in an encouraging tone. "The evil is tremendous, but the danger may be surmounted."

The young ladies were somewhat soothed by her words, but still the anodyne thus conveyed was incommensurate with the frightful lacerations which poignant terror had inflicted upon their souls. Despite, too, the somewhat sanguine manner in which Mrs. Ranger had just announced that there was a loophole of escape from their embarrassments, they were now compelled to pass through another fearful phase of excitement when the old hag circumstantially narrated to them all that had taken place between herself and Maravelli. Heavens! how did the hearts of the three sisters sink within them, and what terrible feelings took possession of their souls, as they heard how Jocelyn Loftus was pursuing the track of his investigations, how he had extorted all the physician's secrets, how he was acquainted with all the adventures of the memorable night at the villa, and how he had the very corpse of the child fished up from the depth of the lake. At one moment so sudden a faintness seized upon Agatha — for Mrs. Ranger was not overnice or delicate in giving the particulars of the narrative as she had heard it from Maravelli — that had not strong restoratives been applied she would have fallen into a swoon. By means of a powerful cordial, however, she was inspired with that artificial energy which is only enjoyed to the prejudice of health's natural vigour, in the same way that opium and alcohol prey upon the constitution which they either lull into dreamy bliss or raise into ecstasy.

"Now, my dear girls, you know the worst," said Mrs. Ranger, "and it is time I should tell you the best. I waylaid Bergami as he returned from Maravelli's house. He of course knows all, but it is quite clear that neither he nor Loftus proposes to have recourse to harsh measures immediately. Their aim is intelligible enough; they mean to get together all the information they can and clear up every point which is at all mysterious or perplexing, before they make the grand exposure. Now, then, we have breathing time; we have the rest of this day before us, and all to-night."

"Good heavens! then to-morrow the exposure may come?" exclaimed the sisters, clasping their hands in despair. "Oh, let us fly, let us fly!"

"Foolish girls! how can you fly?" demanded Mrs. Ranger. "Without time to get passports made out, we should be arrested as suspicious fugitives. No, no, flight is impossible. We must remain and dare it all."

"But we have but a few hours before us," exclaimed Julia, shuddering.

"And in those few hours an immensity may be done," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "Bergami desires to see you all three at the jetty at five o'clock. You must go. It is for the purpose of making another appointment for you elsewhere, and this other appointment is with Loftus, which you must also keep."

"What! see Loftus, after all he knows?" cried Agatha, in dismay. "Is he not aware that I have been delivered of a child? Is not the very corpse of that child in his possession?"

"Oh, it becomes you admirably to play the shamefaced and the prude," cried Mrs. Ranger, scornfully, "you who did all you could to win him to your arms in Paris, displaying all your beauties with the luxuriousness of a wanton — "

"Enough, enough!" said Agatha, biting her lips at the taunt. "If you think it necessary that we shall see Loftus, we will do so."

"Yes, necessary indeed!" replied Mrs. Ranger. Then, in a deeper tone, she added, "It is necessary, because it may save the necessity for three murders."

"What mean you?" demanded Emma, in horror and dismay, as it instantaneously struck her that the dreadful old woman was now alluding to Bergami as well as to others.

"I mean," rejoined Mrs. Ranger, speaking with the firmness of a cold and implacable decision, "that there are three enemies whom we have now to fear. This morning there were two, Loftus and Lady Prescott, but within the last few hours Bergami has been added. Well, then, if Loftus mean to propose some terms and conditions that will avoid the necessity of exposure, and if an avenue of safety be open to us all, then will it be unnecessary to do the work of death. But if, on the other hand, the result of your interviews with Bergami and Loftus respectively should prove that exposure must ensue, that we are not to be spared, and that punishment is intended us, then must Loftus, Lady Prescott, and Bergami all three die this night."

The girls shuddered from head to foot, but Emma's shuddering, as Mrs. Ranger mentioned the name of Bergami, was even more agonizing and convulsive than that of her sisters. But she said nothing, only fell immediately into a profound reverie.

"Methought," said Agatha, in the low, hushed tone of terror, to Mrs. Ranger, "that you had already agreed with Doctor Maravelli — "

"Yes, that Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die," returned the woman, "but I did not then foresee that Jocelyn would desire to have an interview with you. His doing so looks conciliatory, or, rather, I should say, as if he meant to be merciful. In this case his death will answer no good purpose, will be unnecessary. Therefore, after the interview with him to-night, wherever it may take place, it will be for you, Agatha, to judge whether it is safe to let him live, or whether our interests require that he should die. If he is to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli, but if he is to die, then nothing need be said, and the doctor will do his work."

"You argue as if you expected that the interview between us and Loftus," said Agatha, "is sure to take place at Maravelli's house? "

"I believe so, from what Bergami said. However, he will let you know all about it presently, and we shall be perhaps better able to decide how to act. But mind," continued Mrs. Ranger, emphatically, "that whatever our purpose be, our resolution must be bold and inflexible; whatever we determine upon must be carried out to the very letter. Consider how much depends on all this. Is it not better to dare everything, sooner than suffer ourselves to be dragged away to a felon's gaol? I am half-inclined to believe," she added, in a very low whisper, to Agatha, a whisper which she alone heard, "that Emma has become spoony with respect to Bergami. Look into what a mood of abstraction she has fallen, and Julia, too, gazing listlessly upon her — "

"Yes," whispered Agatha, "Emma is indeed in love with Bergami, and I think that the feeling already amounts to an infatuation."

"Ah! if Bergami were a man to be tempted," said Mrs. Ranger, thoughtfully, "he might be won over by Emma's

seductiveness to serve our purposes. We might make use of him to persuade Jocelyn Loftus to pardon us, ay, and even to shield us from any evil consequences — "

" Yes," interrupted Agatha, catching hopefully at the idea, or, rather, we should say desperately, " why should not Bergami be won to Emma's arms? Is he not a mortal of flesh and blood, and is it at all likely he will prove another Jocelyn Loftus? No, no; by those dark expressive eyes, by his whole aspect, Bergami is not a saint, like Jocelyn."

" Then I tell you what must be done," said Mrs. Ranger, still speaking aside with Agatha. " You shall all three keep the appointment with Bergami at five o'clock, and when you have heard what he has to say, do you and Julia leave Emma with him on some pretence. Of course you can tell Emma presently that you are going to do so. She will doubtless be well pleased, and your ingenuity, Agatha, will not fail to devise some feasible excuse for so leaving them together."

Agatha nodded assent to the suggestions which Mrs. Ranger so artfully threw out, and as the hour to keep the appointment was now approaching, the three young ladies proceeded to attire themselves in their walking apparel.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SIREN'S WILES

Punctually at five o'clock Baron Bergami repaired to the trysting-place on the shore of Lake Leman, and there, close by the jetty, did he find the three sisters waiting for him. They were pale, and had evidently been most painfully excited; indeed, as he approached them, their agitation was visible enough, notwithstanding their efforts to look composed and even assume an air of confidence.

Bergami had no pity for them. He felt shocked at the thought that three such lovely creatures, so eminently endowed by nature, should possess hearts so black, and that such fair exteriors should serve as a veil to hide so much profligacy and dissoluteness. Alas! what charming skins do some snakes wear! What dazzling hues appear upon the sinuous forms of those serpents whose touch is death!

Yes, Bergami felt shocked as he thought of the depravity of these three young women whom nature had made so beautiful, and he even experienced the suffocating sense of a sudden indignation as the incidents of the ermine cloak and the personation of himself rushed with vivid effect to his memory. But subduing any outward expression of his emotions, and shrouding whatsoever he felt beneath a calmly dignified demeanour, he made the usual salutation of courtesy as he approached.

His manner, though so reserved and distant, almost to sternness, nevertheless somewhat revived the spirits of the three sisters, for they had almost expected that he would accost them with immediate upbraidings and reproaches. Emma, especially, regained much of her lost fortitude and assurance, and flinging a second glance, from beneath the rich dark fringe of her eyelids, on the calm, pensive, and

mournful features of the baron, she thought to herself, " Oh, if I could conquer him with the artillery of my fascinations, if I could but enmesh him in the web of my seductive snares, we should be saved, we should be saved! "

And as this thought sent a thrill of hope through her entire frame, rousing at the same time some of that natural passion which had sunk sluggish and almost dead under the weight of recent horror, a tint of the fled carnation came back to her cheeks. Bergami noticed this, noticed also the quick and sidelong glance which she had flung upon him, and felt some suspicion of the truth arising in his mind. For Jocelyn had given him some insight into the Circean blandishments and siren wiles which the sisters had practised toward himself in Paris, and thus he was not altogether unprepared for any such display of feminine seductiveness that might be aimed at his own heart.

" Young ladies," he said, without appearing to notice what we have just described, " it is necessary that I should have a few minutes' conversation with you upon a painful, most painful subject. I did not choose to convey to you through Mrs. Ranger all that I wished to say, because I was fearful that she might not deliver my message aright, or that if she did, she might attempt to dissuade you from acting in accordance therewith. Hence my object in seeking this interview, and we who have so often roamed along the banks of Lake Leman as friends, while attending upon our royal mistress, must now tread in the same steps with far different feelings. Lest we should be observed, we will not remain standing in this particular spot. We will walk a little way along the shore, and I beg you will give me your earnest attention."

The party accordingly turned away from the jetty, and began following the course of the lake's margin. Agatha and Julia walked on Bergami's right hand, and Emma on his left, but we need hardly state that he did not offer them his arm. The sisters were, however, still more cheered by his words than they had previously been by his looks, for what he had said seemed uttered in sorrow rather than in anger, and in a tone of deep lament rather than of harsh upbraiding.

" You are aware," he continued, " that I have seen Mr. Loftus. Mrs. Ranger has no doubt told you so, and from

his lips have I heard many, many painful things. Indeed, if all good feeling be not extinguished within you, and at your age I can scarcely believe it possible that you are so thoroughly inured to crime as to be able to contemplate its paths backward without remorse, and forward without fear — "

"No, no, we are not so bad as all that," cried Emma, suddenly catching him by the arm, while her bosom appeared to be wrung with convulsive sobs.

"God grant that what you say may be true," exclaimed Bergami, "but you must all three feel, if you feel anything at all, that an immense atonement is required for the misdeed whereof you have been guilty. That you could not have naturally become so wicked, so very, very wicked, is certain, and that therefore you have been rendered so by a shocking course of training, is equally positive. Indeed, that such was the case I have heard from Mr. Loftus, who, as you are well aware, learned all particulars concerning you from your sister Mary in England. For these reasons, therefore, — I mean, viewing you as the instruments that a hideous system of training rendered pliant and ductile with a sort of plastic art to the purposes of the archfiends who are in England, — both Mr. Loftus and myself are inclined to hold that there is some little extenuation for you. At all events, this is the merciful and compassionate view which Mr. Loftus has thought fit to take of the whole tenor of your conduct, and I do not wish to differ from him. Therefore was it that I commenced by speaking of atonement."

"Ah! show us what atonement we could make," said Emma, the words coming apparently clothed in a gush of fervid feelings from the heart, "and you know not how cheerfully we will follow your commands."

"Yes, and gratefully, too," said Agatha, with a voice into which she likewise threw as much feeling as possible.

"If we could only live the last few months over again," added Julia, "all this would not happen."

"Most sincerely do I hope," continued Bergami, "that these averments of contrition come from the depths of your hearts. But it is not to me that you should say all this; it is not to me that you are to promise atonement. It is to Mr. Loftus, that young man who is as generous as you

have represented him to be base, who is as noble-hearted as you have depicted him to be depraved, who is as high-principled as you have painted him profligate and dissolute, — it is to him, I say, that you must repeat all you are now saying to me. Indeed, Mrs. Ranger has no doubt informed you that Mr. Loftus requires an interview with you this night. Do you feel disposed to visit him at Doctor Maravelli's house? "

" Maravelli's? " ejaculated Agatha, in a voice of unfeigned horror, as she thought of the dead child, her child, which was there, beneath that roof.

" Yes, at Doctor Maravelli's," responded Bergami, " and not only at his house, but likewise at the solemn hour of midnight. All three of you must be there; not one must remain away upon any pretence. Do you understand me, and do you agree? "

" Oh, yes, we accept everything that falls from your lips, as if from the arbiter of our destiny," exclaimed Emma, still in that fervid tone of feeling which she knew so well how to assume. " For my part, I swear to be there."

" And I also," said Julia, " if it will ensure us mercy and forbearance at the hands of Mr. Loftus and yourself."

" Then assuredly I cannot hesitate to declare in the affirmative likewise," added Agatha, in a faint voice.

" It is understood, then," said Bergami, " and I warn you against any hesitation or any neglect in fulfilling the pledge which you have all three given. Ye will go alone through the silence of the night, there are no dangers to apprehend, and ye doubtless know the way thither. Do not attempt to fly from Geneva. I warn you that such an endeavour will prove ineffectual, for I would have you pursued ignominiously, brought back, and mercilessly handed over to punishment."

" I can assure you, oh, I can assure you most positively," said Emma, again catching his arm as if by an involuntary impulse, and looking up into his face with an expression of frightened, deprecating, piteous entreaty, " that we will obey you to the very letter. Do not, do not mistrust us altogether. Everything that we can do now by way of atonement for the past shall be done."

" Yes, Emma," exclaimed Agatha, " plead our cause with Baron Bergami. I am at a loss for words to express all I

feel, but you have greater fortitude than I. Come, Julia, let us leave Emma as our advocate."

Thus speaking, the eldest sister turned abruptly away, accompanied by Julia, and speeding along the shore, without once looking back, they thus retraced their steps toward the jetty.

So suddenly was this manœuvre accomplished, that Bergami, though naturally cool and self-possessed, was taken completely aback, and he could not utter a word; but almost instantaneously penetrating the stratagem, he allowed it to take its course, thus appearing to fall a dupe to the pretence adopted for the purpose of leaving Emma alone in his company.

"Now, what have you to say to me?" he at length asked, turning his looks upon Emma.

"Oh, what can I say to you?" she exclaimed, joining her hands together and gazing up into his countenance with every appearance of the most impassioned appeal. "I would beseech you, I would implore you to have mercy upon myself and my two sisters. But, ah! I feel faint — the excitement I have endured has been too much — permit me to lean upon your arm — only for a few moments, till we reach that knot of trees — There! — Thanks, thanks, Baron Bergami. I see that, after all, you do not so utterly loathe, hate, and despise me — oh, unfortunate being that I am, to be compelled to give utterance to such words as these!"

And she sank, with every appearance of exhaustion, at the foot of a group of trees, to which Bergami had hurried her as she clung to his arm, and the shade of which now concealed them both from the observation of any one who might be walking within eyeshot of the place.

"Pray sit down by my side. Humour me thus far, grant me this little favour," murmured Emma, seeming as if she were about to faint, "for I wish to speak to you seriously, most seriously, and I must rest here for a few minutes."

Bergami made no hesitation in yielding to her request, and this ready complaisance on his part emboldened the artful young woman to an extent that she flattered herself the influence of her spells was beginning to work.

"Oh, if it were not for this delicious breeze which comes from the lake, I should faint," she said, as Bergami seated

himself on the bank at a distance of perhaps three feet from where she was half-reclining. "Is not this breeze beautiful?" and as if with quite a mechanical and unconscious movement, she threw back her scarf and opened the front of her dress in such a manner as to display her bosom.

"Yes," said the baron, not appearing to notice the manœuvre, but keeping his eyes bent downward, "it is indeed a beauteous evening, and distressing is it to think that while nature is so serene around, the human heart cannot imbibe a kindred inspiration from this soft tranquillity. The glory of the descending sun is upon the waters; its beams appear to penetrate, like shafts of living light, down into the very depths of that sleeping sea. How is it that the lustre of that same heavenly orb cannot fathom the profundities of the human soul?"

"Oh, how delicious is it to hear you speak thus!" said Emma, in accents that were soft and musically tremulous. "You do not now seem to be angry with me, you do not now appear as if rancorous feelings were agitating within you — Ah! is it possible that you have comprehended that emotion which for some time past I have experienced toward you? If such be indeed the case, then shall I conceive myself blessed with a happiness which on account of my misdeeds is so utterly undeserved. Ah! you do not chide me, you do not bid me hold my peace? Then indeed is there hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you. Oh, an idea suddenly strikes me," she cried, with no affectation of a suddenly enhancing excitement, for the thought did that moment flash to her brain. "The mercy you are disposed to show us is dictated by a generous pity, dare I say, a tender compassion for me?"

She paused for a reply, but Bergami, instead of giving one, bowed his face upon his hands and appeared to plunge into deep thought.

"Oh, I have guessed the truth," exclaimed Emma, her tones becoming now almost exultant as she felt within herself the assurance that the magic of her charms was working its effect upon the Prussian officer. "Now, then, shall I confess frankly and candidly that I love you. Yes, noble Bergami, from the first moment I set eyes upon you, have I been smitten by your handsome person, your engaging manners, your fascinating discourse; and latterly I have

not been able to conceal from you this love of mine, but have sought on many occasions to convey an intimation of its existence to your comprehension. Think you it was by mere accident that I have been so frequently placed next to you at the dinner-table, or that when walking abroad, I have found myself by your side? Ah! no, it was all intentional on my part, — those little ways and means and artifices by which a woman makes known her love."

"And if I were to give you the assurance of love in return," asked Bergami, slowly raising his head and turning his eyes full upon the young lady's countenance, which was now beaming with mingled hope, passion, and triumph, "if I were to confess to you that I have not been indifferent to your charms, that I have seen and understood your little wiles, and that if I have been slow to respond to them, it is because I was fearful lest my vanity should have led me to construe into love the merest tokens of friendship, — if I were to tell you all this, Emma, would you give me any proof of love in return? Would you convince me that yours is indeed a sincere, a genuine affection, and not a passing fantasy and evanescent whim?"

"O heavens! is it true, is it possible, that I hear you talking thus?" cried Emma, hurried away by the raptures of exultation and amorous passion, which were now utterly past control, and seizing Bergami's hand, she pressed it first to her lips and then to her heaving bosom.

"Love must have no dalliance until its sincerity has been proved," said Bergami, gently withdrawing his hand, but gazing upon Emma with every appearance of a tenderness that no longer sought to conceal itself.

"Speak, speak, what mean you?" she cried, the fever-heat of enthusiastic joy thrilling through her entire form.

"I said ere now that I required a proof of your love. Oh, give it to me," he added, with accents that suddenly became full of entreaty, as if he himself were inspired with some of the passion that made Emma's blood course like lightning in its crimson channels.

"But what proof do you require?" she asked, confident that her charms had altogether subdued him, and that he had become fettered as a slave within the magic circle of her blandishments.

"What proof?" he said, as if pausing to consider, "what

proof? I scarcely know what to ask for, unless it be your entire confidence with regard to the sad, tortuous course you have been pursuing. Yes, tell me everything, Emma," he continued, trembling as if with a strong excitement. "Prove that you are worthy of my love, that you are sorry for the past, and that you will do all you can by your good conduct to make reparation in future. Convince me, I say, that you are worthy of the love which I have to give you, and the confession of that love shall be made."

"This is happiness unspeakable, ineffable," murmured Emma, really feeling what she said; for, as the reader is already aware, she had for some time past conceived a strong fancy for Bergami. "Ask me what you choose, and I will reply faithfully and truly."

"Then will you secure my most devoted love," replied Bergami, gazing upon her with looks that seemed full of passion; but as she again attempted to seize his hand, he snatched it away, crying, "No, no, not until you have given me proofs the most convincing that you love me. Then, then, it is not my hand that you shall take, but it is to my arms you shall come — "

And he stopped short, gasping as with excess of pleasure at the bare idea of joys which he was conjuring up to his imagination.

"Ah! ask me some question and you will see whether I am prompt to reply," said Emma, whose head was turning and whose senses were becoming bewildered in the tumult of blissful emotions which her easy triumph over Bergami had naturally excited, and which were all the more extravagant, all the more thrilling and intoxicating, inasmuch as they had succeeded an interval of such blank despair and cruel terror.

"Well, then," said Bergami, speaking quickly, as if putting at random the first thing that entered his head, "tell me, dear Emma, tell me, which of you three sisters it is who, not content with masquerading on one or two occasions in male costume, must actually have imitated so closely the very garb that I sometimes wear as to be taken for me? "

"Oh, if I tell you, if I tell you," exclaimed Emma, now elevated to the highest degree of excitement, as if she felt she was touching on the very brink of that paradise which

contained the consummation of her desires and would be the reward as well as the proof of her triumph, " if I tell you everything which regards that subject, shall I the next moment be enfolded in your embrace? "

" Yes, yes," answered Bergami, " you shall, you shall."

" Then it was I who have worn a costume resembling yours," she answered, in the delirium that filled her brain. " It was I who personated you, having secretly procured a dress the counterpart of your own. Yes, and likewise whiskers and moustache — oh, a beautiful moustache," she cried, almost with childish delight, in the exultation that filled her soul and was thus hurrying her so quickly along in the giddy whirl of her thoughts. " In every respect did I assume your external appearance, coat, boots — And all that costume, so neat, so perfect, so elegant, I have it still, it is in my own room, and one of these days, when you have time and choose to humour me, I will put it on and you will tell me how I look."

" Oh, Emma, Emma! you are intoxicating my brain, you are making me drunk with wicked thoughts," murmured the royal equerry, as he drew closer toward the siren. " Come into my arms."

And the next moment Emma, the wanton, glowing, impassioned Emma, was palpitating upon his breast, with her arms thrown around his neck and her lips pressed to his cheek. But scarcely had this incident of the scene endured for a moment, scarcely, indeed, had she thus precipitated herself into his embrace, when, appearing to be suddenly alarmed, he said, " We shall be observed, we shall be observed. Good heavens! what will then be thought? What will be said of us? " And disengaging himself from her clasp, he started to his feet.

" Oh, you are mine, you are mine! " she exclaimed, in a voice full of rapture, " and I am happy, I am happy," she repeated, her tone swelling to a pitch of thrilling exultation. " But when shall we meet again — Ah! we shall meet in the presence of others, but I mean, when shall we meet alone? "

" Listen, Emma," said Bergami, taking her hand and pressing it with every appearance of enthusiastic warmth, " I long to see you in that dress of which you have spoken,

that costume wherewith you imitate me. Will you then put it on to-night and come to my chamber?"

"To-night!" echoed Emma, in rapturous joy. "Yes, but that appointment at Maravelli's house, with Jocelyn Loftus —"

"Must be kept," answered Bergami, "because I dare not appear in any way to depart one tittle from the arrangements entered into between him and me, and if you were not to go, you would have to allege as an excuse some new understanding with me. This would be to betray what has now taken place, to betray my weakness, in a word, to prove that I had succumbed to the fascination of your charms. And this must not be. Not even to your sisters must you state what has occurred. If you do, if to a living soul you breathe a syllable of this love of ours, I will then stifle it, I will renounce it, I will tear your image from my heart, — yes, and all this love of mine, this frantic passion with which you have inspired me, shall turn into the deadliest hate! Do you understand me, and will you pledge yourself sacredly and solemnly?"

"I do, I do," answered Emma, trembling all over with the fever of joyous excitement, for this seemed to be a triumph so wondrous, so complete, so crowning on her part, that while it promised to minister unto all her devouring desires, it was likewise most eminently flattering to her vanity. "I swear that I will not mention to a soul, no, not to a soul, one syllable of what has now taken place between us. I will keep the appointment, too, at Maravelli's house, in company with my sisters. And afterward," she said, with a look full of wanton wickedness and sensuous mischief, "afterward —"

"Yes, afterward, no matter at what hour you may come back to the villa from that appointment," said Bergami, "you will apparel yourself in the costume of which you have spoken, and you will come stealthily to my chamber?"

"Yes, oh, yes, I will not fail you," she murmured, her heart already panting with voluptuous longings, as with eyes brimful of passion she surveyed the handsome Bergami from head to foot, devouring him, as it were, with her luxurious looks.

"And now return to your sisters," he said, seizing her hand and again pressing it with cordial warmth. "But

remember," he added, fixing upon her an earnest, warning gaze, "if you betray me, then farewell love, farewell the safety which I may guarantee to your sisters and yourself, farewell everything, save the implacable vengeance which I will wreak upon you."

Having thus spoken, the royal equerry hurried away toward the villa, avoiding altogether the border of the lake as he thus retraced his steps homeward.

Some minutes elapsed before Emma could in any way succeed in calming the flutterings of her heart or reason herself into tranquillity. She was now entirely absorbed in this new passion which had suddenly blazed up in her heart, being so unexpectedly and copiously fed by the burning fuel which Bergami's conduct had imparted to it. Indeed, so complete was the influence which that man had in so short a time succeeded in gaining over her, that she was resolved, as far as she was able, to follow his injunctions in respect to keeping their amour secret. That is to say, she decided upon telling her sisters as little on the subject as possible, lest by any chance an unfortunate look, or a word too full of meaning on their part, should prove to Bergami that she had betrayed him and thus alienate him from her for ever. Having settled this determination in her mind, and having composed her looks and her thoughts as well as she was able, she issued forth from the shady bower formed by the group of trees, and retraced her way along the bank of Lake Leman toward the jetty, in order to rejoin her sisters.

But in the meantime what had happened to Agatha and Julia? For while Emma was engaged with Bergami in the manner just described, her two sisters were experiencing an adventure which, although appearing at the moment to be but of trivial importance in comparison with the other exciting circumstances that surrounded them, was nevertheless destined to prove most grave and serious in its results.

On parting so abruptly from Emma and Bergami, Agatha and Julia sped along the shore of the lake in the direction of the jetty whence they had ere now started.

"Think you that Emma will succeed with the equerry?" asked Julia. "Oh, if he were to yield to her seductiveness, her wiles, her fascinations!"

"It would indeed be most important for us," replied

Agatha. "For, to speak candidly, although I feel not so truly wretched now as I did a few hours back when this storm of dangers exploded above our heads, yet still my heart is filled with misgivings."

"And naturally so," said Julia. "This appointment with Loftus at Maravelli's house, where the dead child lies —"

"Oh, do not talk of it," interrupted Agatha, a strong tremor shooting through her entire form as she and her sister paced rapidly along the margin of the lake, on whose sleeping waters the slanting sunbeams still poured the mellowed glow of their effulgence.

Then there was a long silence, which remained unbroken until the sisters came within a few yards of the jetty, when, raising their eyes from the ground on which they had been bent in meditative mood, they suddenly observed a gentleman seated on a beam which had become detached from the mass of piles and intricacy of woodwork forming the huge pier. At the very same moment that Agatha and Julia observed this gentleman, another gentleman appeared around the piles forming the commencement of the jetty, and as these two gentlemen thus met, evidently unexpectedly, ejaculations of surprise burst from their lips.

"Ah! my lord?" exclaimed the one who had just made his appearance upon the scene.

"What! you here again, Colonel Malpas?" cried the other, sternly, as he sprang up from his seat on the beam.

But simultaneously did a cry of amazement fall from the lips of Julia as she at once recognized the Earl of Curzon in this latter individual.

"Ah!" cried the nobleman, whose attention was now all in a moment attracted to Julia, "is it indeed you, my charmer, my beauty?"

"Then the other must be Emma," exclaimed Malpas, also springing forward along with the earl toward the ladies; but on catching sight of Agatha's countenance he stopped short, in sudden disappointment, stammering, "No — it is not — I beg a thousand pardons."

"This is my elder sister, Miss Owen," said Julia, at once assuming a dignified and even haughty look. "Agatha," she continued, turning to her sister, "this is the Earl of Curzon, of whom I have spoken to you on former occasions."

"And you have already learned," said the colonel, again

advancing, " by the expression which fell from Lord Curzon's lips, that my name is Malpas. Doubtless your sister, Miss Emma, has mentioned my name to you, since it appears that you," he added, fixing his eyes upon Julia, " have spoken of the earl to your sister here."

" And it would likewise seem, then," Julia at once observed, " that the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas have spoken to each other relative to us, else would they be more discreet in what they let fall from their lips on the present occasion."

" Dear Julia," said the earl, " let us have no angry words, I implore you. I have come all the way from England to see you again."

" And I also to see your sister Emma again," added Malpas. " Ah! where is she? "

" But why this haughtiness of air, this reserved manner, this repelling look? " exclaimed Curzon, in a tone of entreaty to Julia.

While the preceding conversation was taking place, both Agatha and Julia had maintained that air of calm dignity which, as well as any other mien, they knew so well how to put on to suit the particular occasion. The elder sister now saw Curzon and Malpas for the first time, and she certainly could not wonder that her sisters had accepted them as lovers, for, as the reader is aware, they were both good-looking, tall, and well made. She however affected to regard them without interest, but with a certain loftiness of demeanour, as if she identified herself with the displeasure which Julia chose to demonstrate.

" I can say for myself, Lord Curzon," observed the latter young lady, in reply to the passionate exclamations which had been addressed to her, " and I think I can also answer for my sister Emma in her absence, that the plot you and Colonel Malpas so unaccountably but so shamefully set on foot to carry us off to Lausanne, but which so signally failed, must be considered as having raised up an insurmountable barrier between us in future. I therefore wish you good evening. Agatha, come, dear."

" One word, Julia," ejaculated Curzon, seizing her by the hand and holding it fast despite her efforts to withdraw it. " We cannot part thus. I beseech you to give me an opportunity to explain myself."

"And I, Miss Owen," said Malpas, addressing himself to Agatha, "beseech you to intercede in my behalf with your sister Emma, since it is evident that you have no secrets from each other."

"Unhand me, Lord Curzon," said Julia, but her efforts to extricate her hand from his grasp had become feebler and feebler. Indeed, with every appearance of vanishing fortitude and dissolving coldness she said, "Do let me go, 'tis useless to detain me."

"But will you not give me an opportunity of explaining myself?" persisted Curzon. "After all that has taken place between us, I beg and implore you — "

"I will do nothing — nothing," returned Julia, though with less decision in her voice than before, "unless by Emma's consent. We have told each other everything, we have no secrets, and we must act in concert."

"Yes," observed Agatha, in reply to the solicitations which Malpas continued to press upon her to the effect that she would speak on his behalf to Emma, "I can say nothing more than that my sister must act for herself."

"Then listen," exclaimed Curzon, an idea suddenly striking him, and still he retained Julia's hand in his own. "Will you forward me your decision in writing? Will you think over it? But I implore you not to send me back to England without having had an opportunity of making my peace with you, even if everything should be at an end between us."

"Where will a note reach you?" asked Julia, scarcely knowing what she said, for the natural sentimentalism of her disposition was triumphing over her endeavour to appear distant and reserved, and had it not been for the presence of Agatha, to whom she had boasted in the morning of the way she should treat Curzon if ever they met again, she would at once have precipitated herself into his arms.

"I am staying at the Hotel Royal, and this time under my own name," he said. "Will you send me a line, only a single line, to that address? And whatever appointment you may give, — for I know that you cannot be cruel enough to refuse my request, — I will keep."

"Well, well," said Julia, faintly, "I will think of it. Perhaps you shall hear from me," and now she withdrew her hand, but not before Curzon had pressed it to his lips.

"Then, if Emma will see you, Colonel Malpas," said Agatha, anxious to put an end to the present scene, "she also shall write to you. What is your address?"

"By a coincidence," answered the colonel, "I also have taken up my abode at the Hotel Royal. I only arrived within this hour at Geneva, and at once strolled down hither in the hope, and almost with the presentiment —"

"Well, but what name do you bear at the Hotel Royal?" asked Agatha, somewhat impatiently.

"My own name, that of Malpas," was the reply. "But pray do your best for me with your charming sister Emma."

"We shall see," rejoined Agatha. "Good evening, Colonel Malpas; good evening, my lord," and taking Julia's hand, she turned abruptly away from the nobleman and the colonel.

But as Julia accompanied her, she threw a quick and scarcely perceptible glance at Curzon over her shoulder, a glance which nevertheless conveyed hope and promise.

The two girls passed quickly away from the vicinage of the jetty, once more proceeding along the bank in the direction which they had ere now pursued with Bergami and their sister. When near the clump of trees they encountered Emma, who was coming to meet them, and all three hastened by the shortest cut back to the villa.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas stood gazing for upwards of a minute on the retreating forms of Agatha and Julia until they were at some considerable distance, and then, averting their eyes, they threw their looks upon each other. It was evident that for the moment Curzon knew not exactly how to treat Malpas, and that the colonel, on the other hand, was equally uncertain on what ground to consider himself standing with regard to the earl, the scene at Lausanne being naturally uppermost in the mind of each, — that scene in which they had mutually forced the revelation of secrets at the pistol's muzzle.

"So we meet again," said Curzon, at length breaking silence. Then bursting out into a laugh that was partly real and partly forced, he cried, "Well, upon my word, there is something uncommonly ludicrous in all this."

"And awkward, too," said Malpas, also laughing, for he would much sooner be on good than on bad terms with the earl.

"I suppose that Venetia has sent you again?" said Curzon, inquiringly.

"Yes," answered Malpas. "And she has sent you too, doubtless?"

"I do not deny it. I will even admit it is on the same errand, too, as before, but this time with far more positive instructions."

"The same with me," rejoined Malpas. "I am to leave no stone unturned to break up the conspiracy. I am even to tell Emma that I know all about it, and threaten her with exposure unless she herself voluntarily withdraws from it."

"Just what I am to say to Julia," remarked Curzon. "And the reward which Venetia has promised you?"

"A thousand a year," replied Malpas. "She gave me five thousand when in London, and I expect to find three or four thousand more when I call at the banker's in this city to-morrow. I came too late to-day. Those thousands are a reward for past services — But what have you had, and what more do you expect?"

"I also have had a few thousands," replied Curzon, "and, more than that, I am to have a marquisate and a pension. Venetia has promised it to me. But I see that we must compare notes again, and that we have a great deal to talk about. Come, since we are both staying at the same hotel, let us return thither in each other's company, and if you like, we will dine together and talk matters over."

"Be it so," responded Malpas. "What are the odds that we do not each receive a tender billet from our fair ones before many hours have elapsed?"

"I am convinced that we shall," answered Curzon. "That parting glance which Julia gave me has left no room for doubt."

Thus conversing, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas strolled away from the vicinage of the pier, in the direction of the city.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LISTENERS — THE OLD HARRIDAN

The plot of our tale is thickening rapidly; incidents are multiplying, and episodes are growing out of the adventures which we are now chronicling. It therefore requires a clear head on our part to keep these varied and yet ramified occurrences as distinctly defined as possible, each in the special channel in which it is flowing, while the reader must carefully follow us as we advance in the seeming labyrinth, through which we shall, however, conduct him in a way to render all the objects he may encounter perfectly intelligible and clear.

But ere we return to the three sisters whom we left wending their way back to the villa, we must pause for a little space to inform our readers that the whole scene which we have just described as having taken place on the part of Curzon, Malpas, Agatha, and Julia was witnessed by two ladies who were concealed behind the piles of the jetty. These two ladies were Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon, for such was really Maravelli's new lodger, who had chosen to call herself Mrs. Montague.

When Curzon and Malpas were at a sufficient distance from the pier, Lady Prescott and the countess issued forth from their hiding-place, and for some minutes they walked along the bank of the lake, side by side, in the deepest silence. But their countenances showed how violent, or, rather, how intense, were the feelings that agitated their hearts, the passions which swayed their souls. Each was of an olive complexion, but a dead pallor now sat upon their features, and the strangeness of their looks marred even their beauty and gave them at the moment a ghastly, almost a hideous aspect.

" This is a strange, a wonderful coincidence," said Lady Prescott, at length breaking silence.

" Yes, a coincidence that seems as if it were prepared by Satan," responded the Countess of Curzon, in a tone full of deep and sinister meaning.

" I understand you," said Lady Prescott, as if her own voice had caught up precisely the same intonation, which was indeed natural enough, as the same furies were gnawing at either heart and their souls were tortured by kindred fires.

" Now," said the Countess of Curzon, after a brief pause, " that man on whose head you have invoked an implacable vengeance is in your power."

" But that man," rejoined Lady Prescott, " is your husband."

" My husband! " echoed Editha, with a mocking laugh and a fiendish look, " my mortal enemy, you mean. If you refuse to slay him, I will do the deed myself. Heartless villain, miscreant that he is, he has covered me with disgrace and plunged me into ruin. Oh, with what fiendlike malice did he gloat over my fall and expose me even to the very servants on that dreadful night when everything was discovered. Ay, and that demoniac vengeance which he wreaked upon my faithful, my loving Gertrude — But I have already told you everything, Lady Prescott, and need not recapitulate."

" Then you are decided upon abandoning your husband unto my vengeance? " asked the latter.

" I am," replied Editha, in a deep voice, but the accents of which were full of a frightful and implacable resolution.

" Vengeance for me, then! " exclaimed Lady Prescott, in a tone suddenly thrilling with exultation, " and vengeance likewise for you, inasmuch as Malpas, that man of whom you have told me so many things, is within your reach."

" Yes, Malpas, the vile, sneaking, pitiful coward," resumed Editha, with a terrible accentuation on the words, " he who gave my husband all the information which enabled him to unmask the stratagem carried on through the agency of Lady Lechmere, he who furnished the clue to those arrangements which had been so admirably combined and which without such betrayal would have defied all his penetration, that Malpas who has worked so much mischief

after all the love I once bestowed on him, that villain is at length in my power, and he shall die."

Having given utterance to these words with a terrible emphasis, Editha remained silent for two or three minutes, during which interval Lady Prescott also held her peace, being absorbed in her own reflections.

" Does it not seem," at length continued the Countess of Curzon, " as if some superior power were guiding us on both alike to the consummation of that vengeance which we had so much longed to wreak, but the accomplishment of which until this last half-hour seemed so distant, even if it were ever possible at all? But as I have already told you, some secret and unaccountable presentiment urged me, when flying from disgrace in England and seeking refuge on the Continent, to visit Geneva. It was not so much on account of the tranquillity of this little republic that I came hither, but impelled by that feeling to which I have just alluded — "

" But," interrupted Lady Prescott, " in recounting your history to me yesterday, did you not mention that during the long absence of your husband from home you received two letters, one bearing the postmark of Milan, and the other of Geneva? "

" Yes, it was so," answered Lady Curzon, " and perhaps this circumstance was floating uppermost in my mind, though unconsciously at the time, when I resolved upon coming to Geneva. But far, very far was I from anticipating that I should meet my husband here. Equally little did I expect to encounter this hated Malpas, against whom all my rage is now concentrated. When we came forth to walk this evening and bent our steps toward the jetty — "

" You would not believe, when from a distance I recognized your husband approaching," interrupted Lady Prescott. " But I knew him at once, knew him by his gait, his walk so noble, so dignified, so commanding, and yet so elegant."

" Heavens! can you thus praise him whom you have doomed to death? " cried Editha, almost savagely.

" True, I was wrong to call up any memory that might possibly serve to weaken me in my purpose. And yet it was not through a transitory failing in my resolve," continued Lady Prescott, " for that is stern, inexorable, but it was the train of thought unwittingly flowing on and giving

expression to itself, even, as it were, against my own will."

"We must show no weakness in the consummation of our design," said Editha.

"Think you not that the scene which has just taken place is but too well calculated to rivet the implacability of my own craving for revenge?" asked Lady Prescott. "When at that moment we first beheld Lord Curzon approaching the jetty, and I dragged you, as it were, behind the piles so that we might conceal ourselves from his view, it was because I wished to watch his movements. In thus wishing I had a motive, and that motive was to avail myself of any circumstance which might transpire to put the means of vengeance within my reach. And he, not having observed us as we so quickly concealed ourselves under the jetty, he, little suspecting who was so near, addressed himself in words of tenderness and love and entreaty to that profligate Julia Owen."

"But all those allusions which subsequently took place," asked Editha, "between my husband and Malpas relative to Lady Sackville, what could they mean?"

"Oh, let us not trouble ourselves," exclaimed Lady Prescott, "about the affairs of others. We have our own course to pursue."

"Yes, you are right," said Editha. "Let us concentrate all our thoughts upon this vengeance which we are about to wreak."

Return we now to the three sisters.

When Emma rejoined Agatha and Julia in the manner already described, she had not so fully composed her countenance as to subdue altogether the flush of pleasurable excitement which the scene with Bergami had conjured up.

"Have you ensnared him? Have you touched his heart?" inquired Julia, anxiously.

"Yes, I think that I have made some little impression upon him," responded Emma. "I evidently moved him by my tears and the little demonstrations of love that I was enabled to make, but I dared not go too far. At all events," she added, suddenly recollecting the frightful threat which Mrs. Ranger had uttered ere now, that if circumstances required the deed, Bergami must die as well as Loftus and

Lady Prescott, "at all events, I think that to-morrow, if I have another opportunity, I shall gain a victory. Indeed, I am sure of it. There is no need to fear Bergami. He will rather take our part than otherwise, and altogether I am full of hope that we shall yet come forth scatheless from the terrible ordeal of dangers through which we are passing."

"Oh, what a blessing it will be to hail peace, contentment, and tranquillity once more!" said Agatha, with the most genuine sincerity.

"And I echo the observation," added Julia. "Let us once get clear out of this present embarrassment, and no more conspiracies for me, no more intrigues save those of gallantry and love. And this reminds me to tell you, Emma, of what has just taken place down at the jetty yonder."

She then described the scene which had occurred with the earl and with Malpas. Emma was much astonished to hear of the return of those two individuals, and when her sister had concluded her tale, she said, "It was all very well to promise to write to them, in order to get rid of their importunity, but I hope, Julia, that you do not intend any such thing. Remember what you said this morning, — that you would never forgive Curzon — "

"Nor will I," interrupted Julia, somewhat petulantly, though at the bottom of her heart there lurked the secret resolve that should existing circumstances turn out favourably in the long run, she would renew her amour with the handsome earl despite her two sisters' ridicule or scorn.

They now reëntered the villa, and it being past seven o'clock, they had only just time to hasten to their respective rooms and make the necessary change in their toilet for dinner. This repast in the princess's household was usually served up at half-past seven, but on the evening of which we are writing it was delayed somewhat, and therefore the sisters were not late, after all. The princess had been seized with indisposition, probably arising from the excitement which she had experienced during the day, and she kept her own room instead of descending to the dinner-table. Bergami was likewise absent, he having gone into the city with the alleged excuse of being invited to dine with a friend, but in reality to see Jocelyn Loftus. There were consequently only the six ladies in waiting, the young lady who acted as "reader" to the princess, and Mrs. Ranger at the dinner-

table on the present occasion. The meal was not therefore prolonged, and soon after the dessert, Mrs. Ranger sought an opportunity of taking Agatha aside in order to ascertain what had passed at the interview with Bergami.

Proceeding to another room, the old harridan and the young lady shut themselves in, and the latter repeated all that Bergami had said in her hearing. She then explained what Emma had said relative to her hopes of success in ensnaring the royal equerry within the influence of her charms.

"And this appointment with Loftus is for twelve to-night?" said Mrs. Ranger, who had listened with the profoundest attention and interest to all that had just fallen from Agatha's lips.

"For twelve to-night," responded the young lady, shuddering visibly.

"But Bergami's manner was kind?" continued Mrs. Ranger, still speaking interrogatively.

"No, not kind, but forbearing," answered Agatha.

"Ah! I do not like it, I do not like it," said Mrs. Ranger, and she shook her head ominously. "But does Emma really think that she will succeed in winning the equerry to her arms?"

"She does, she does," replied Agatha. "She is sanguine, — so sanguine that she feels convinced Bergami will save us."

"But Bergami cannot save us if Jocelyn Loftus be determined to ruin us," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, emphatically. "Ah! if Bergami had succumbed this evening, if Emma had succeeded ere now in bringing him to her feet, if, in a word, he had already received her favours, then would it be different, and he would doubtless raise heaven and earth to save her, and in saving her must have held us harmless, also. But it is not so. He has not succumbed, and any little advantage which Emma may have gained over his feelings by playing upon his senses will be lost as sober reflection returns to him. Besides, wherefore has Bergami gone into the city now? Not to dine with a friend. No, it is preposterous, but to see Loftus — "

"Ah! then you really believe," interrupted Agatha, "that we are still as much encompassed by dreadful perils as ever?"

"Do I think so?" ejaculated Mrs. Ranger, "indeed, I

do. And now prepare yourself, Agatha, prepare yourself, I say," she repeated, in a deep voice and with an ominous look, " to hear the resolve, the last resolve to which I have come, a resolve which is fixed and whence there shall be no retreat."

" And that resolve? " asked Agatha, shudderingly.

" It is," returned Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with reptile-like glare upon the young lady, " that unless Loftus positively and actually, of his own accord, proclaims his forgiveness of you this night, you must withhold the word from Maravelli's ear that will spare his and Lady Prescott's life. You must let the physician do the work of death according to his promise, and then Bergami must die also."

" But Emma? " interrupted Agatha, in a thick and scarcely audible voice, " will she consent to this? Or will she not, in her vanity, her infatuation, or whatever it may be, insist that Bergami shall live, for her to try her seductive arts upon him? "

" Foolish girl that you are! " said Mrs. Ranger, " can you not understand that Emma must be kept ignorant of this feature of our proceedings? "

" Oh, yes, I understand you now," said Agatha, shuddering again. " Would to God that I also were ignorant — "

" Cease this pining and whining," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, sharply. " It is not your hand that will do these deeds, nor will suspicion fall upon us. Let Maravelli work, on the one hand, with his subtle poisons; I, on the other, will go and seek those instruments of crime, Kobolt and his gang, whom this night I will introduce secretly and stealthily into the villa. They shall hide themselves in my room until you return from Maravelli's. Then if you tell me that your interview with Loftus has been of a satisfactory character and that you have spoken the word to Maravelli to spare him and Lady Prescott, then, I say, may Bergami be spared also, and Kobolt with his comrades may go about their business. But if, on the other hand, on your return from Maravelli's you tell me that the word has not been spoken, but that Loftus and Lady Prescott will die, then must Bergami die also. Kobolt and his gang will do the work, and ere they quit his room, to which I myself will conduct them, they in their experience of such matters shall give it the aspect of having been entered for the sake of plunder — "

"Oh, cease these details," interrupted Agatha. "Do what you will, take any step you consider necessary, no matter how desperate, to save us all from this gulf of ruin which yawns at our feet. But, my God! spare me the details, spare me the details! Would to Heaven that the next week, or even the next four and twenty hours, were over!"

"Now, do not give way to this puling language," said Mrs. Ranger, harshly. "Be a woman of courage; take a lesson from me. Have I not told you, on former occasions, that when circumstances require energetic action, I shake off the nervousness and the affectation of the woman, and buckle on an armour of strength and effrontery such as men themselves might be proud to wear? Come, you must not remain too long away from the drawing-room. Go back, sustain your own spirits, and do all you can to cheer your sisters. And mind," added Mrs. Ranger, impressively, "not a syllable, not a single syllable to either of them, least of all to Emma, relative to the decision to which I have come in respect to Bergami. I now go forth to find Kobolt and his gang, who, from what Maravelli told me this morning, are sure to be found dragging the lake at the jetty."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Ranger hastened away from the apartment where the preceding colloquy had taken place, while Agatha, after remaining for a few minutes to compose her looks and settle her thoughts, went back to the drawing-room.

It was now nine o'clock, and Bergami had returned. When Agatha entered the room, she found him seated on a sofa, apparently engaged with a book, but he was in reality watching Emma's looks and manner, in order to see whether from any little circumstance he could possibly judge if she had betrayed to her sisters the scene which had taken place in the shade of the knot of trees. Presently the young lady, catching his look and perceiving in it a kind of inquiring expression, seized an opportunity to approach him under pretence of showing him a print at which she had been looking at the table, and as she bent down, she said, in the lowest possible whisper, "I see that you are observing me, but I have not broken my word."

"It is well," was the responsive whisper that came from the equerry's lips, accompanied by a look of deep meaning.

Emma felt her heart leap with joy at this species of renewed pledge of affection which Bergami had just given her, and she returned to her seat, scarcely able to prevent her feelings from being betrayed by her countenance.

CHAPTER XXX

FRESH SCENES AT THE JETTY

The Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas were sipping their wine at the Hotel Royal, between eight and nine o'clock, and discoursing on the object of their revisit to Geneva, and though there was evidently a forced familiarity subsisting between them, instead of the intimacy of friendship, they nevertheless were opening their minds pretty freely to each other.

"Well, but about this pretty Genevese girl of whom we were talking just now," said Malpas, after a brief pause in the discourse, "what do you propose doing with regard to her?"

"I will go and see her to-morrow," answered the earl, "and no doubt shall have a pretty scene of weeping and bitterness and reproaches and so forth. But I must make up my mind to endure all that, and when the first ebullition of feeling has subsided, I shall enter upon the business part of the matter and propose a little annuity or something of the sort."

"Or else find some needy young fellow," observed Malpas, with a laugh, "who, for a certain sum of money paid down, will take the girl altogether off your hands and father the child when it is born."

"Well, perhaps I may do something in that way," rejoined Curzon, carelessly. "But the worst of it is, the girl is rather sentimentally inclined and not mercenary. She is one of those tender-hearted creatures who will persist in loving when they themselves are no longer loved, and who cannot see or will not understand that they were taken for aught save the playthings of the moment."

But this heartless speech, so well worthy of an English

aristocrat, — who, by the bye, beats all the rest of humanity on the score of utter heartlessness, — was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the waiter, who presented a note to the Earl of Curzon and then immediately retired.

"A lady's hand! a sweet, beautiful hand!" ejaculated the nobleman, as he took up the billet.

"From the Owens?" demanded the colonel, eagerly.

"No doubt of it," was his lordship's reply. "Who else could write to us in Geneva?"

Thus speaking, he broke the seal and glanced his eyes over the note. Then tossing it across the table, he observed, with a self-satisfied air, "To be sure! Did I not tell you how it would be?"

Malpas hastened to read the billet, the laconic contents of which ran as follows:

"Emma and Julia, having maturely considered the request proffered by Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon, and deeming it right to give them an opportunity of explaining their conduct, will meet them at half-past nine o'clock precisely by the jetty on the border of the lake."

"Brief enough," said Malpas, "but explicit as brief. What say you? Shall we stroll thitherward at once?"

"By all means," answered Curzon. "I am anxious to get the business over and my mission fulfilled as soon as possible. Depend upon it, I do not intend to dally for as many days as I did weeks on the previous occasion after my fair Julia. I shall tell her my mind as plain as possible, according to my instructions, and have done with it."

"And I shall pursue the same course with regard to Emma," said Malpas, "because I mean to travel into Italy and thence pass up the Mediterranean to Turkey — "

"Well, never mind your future plans," interrupted the earl. "Let us go forth and attend to present occupations."

Having lighted their cigars, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas issued from the hotel and sauntered through the streets toward the lake, so regulating their walk according to the time that they reached the jetty about five minutes to the half-hour.

The night was beautiful. The sky was of a purply azure, studded with many a twinkling star, for the mist common to that clime and spot after sunset had only just begun to

settle on the surface of the lake, and had not sufficiently expanded to mar the clear view of heaven above.

The earl and Malpas walked to and fro in the immediate vicinity of the jetty, impregnating the air with the smoke of their cigars and speaking but little. They were not kept waiting beyond the time mentioned in the note, for scarcely had the clock towers chimed the half-hour when two female figures, closely veiled, passed suddenly around the massive woodwork forming the commencement of the pier, and accosted the two loungers.

"Ah! this is indeed kind of you," said Curzon, as one of the ladies immediately took him by the arm and began to draw him away from his companion Malpas, on whose arm the other lady fastened herself in a similar manner.

Curzon took the hand which rested upon his arm, and pressed it tenderly, at the same time observing, "Will you not raise your veil? Am I not to be permitted one kiss, Julia, one single kiss, after this absence? Or, at all events, may I not claim it as the reward for having come back to you? What! no answer? And yet methought that when you looked back at me for a single moment this evening, as you turned abruptly away with your sister Agatha, there was forgiveness in those sweet eyes of thine. But I suppose," continued the earl, after having vainly paused for nearly a minute to see whether his fair one would vouchsafe a reply, "that you feel yourself so deeply offended that you must have an explanation before you confer the slightest favour. Is it so, Julia? Come, speak, speak!"

While the earl was thus addressing his female companion, who was both cloaked and veiled, she had led him around the piles of the jetty, so that they were now upon the opposite side from that where they had first met; or, to make the matter still more intelligible to the reader, we may observe that Malpas and his companion had remained on one side of the pier, while Curzon and his fair one had gone around to the other.

"Come now," resumed the earl, having a second time paused to see whether any answer would be vouchsafed, "this silence is ridiculous, this affectation most absurd. I thought that I should find you in a better mood, Julia. I did not think you could shut yourself up in a sullenness like this. Well, if you will not answer me, I must endeavour to

unseal those sweet lips of yours. It is usually said that kisses seal woman's lips; but I must now see if they will not have a contrary effect."

Thus speaking, Curzon threw his arms around his companion and endeavoured to tear away her veil. But all in a moment she started a pace backward, threw up the veil of her own accord, and exclaimed, "Behold me!"

"What! is it possible?" cried the earl, staggering back in utter amazement, as by the pure moonlight he discovered the features of Lady Prescott.

"Yes, 'tis I, the plaything whom you tossed aside," she instantaneously responded, in a hoarse voice.

Then, even as the last words were still issuing from her lips, she raised her arm, something gleamed in her hand. The next moment there was a flash, accompanied by a report, and quickly followed by the ejaculation of "O God!" uttered in sudden agony. Then there was a splash as of a heavy body falling into the lake, and all was still on this side of the pier.

But on the other side the report of the pistol was echoed, not by a mere reverberation, but by a like sound emanating from a similar weapon, and there, too, was a momentary cry of death, followed by a heavy splash in the lake, a gurgling sound, and the next instant all was still likewise on that side of the pier.

A few moments afterward Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon met each other at the commencement of the jetty, as each was hurrying away from the spot where murder had been accomplished.

"You have done it?" said the one to the other, in the low, hoarse voice of crime.

"Yes," was the answer, delivered in the same tone, and then they both hurried on toward the city without speaking another word, without even daring to exchange another look, for theirs was now the companionship of crime, a hideous and a horrible companionship, which deadens all friendship, stifles all sympathies, raising up in their place gloomy suspicion, dark mistrust, and therefore mutual aversion.

Half an hour afterward, when the mist had completely settled upon the lake and was veiling all the circumjacent scenery, three figures approached the jetty, and having satis-

fied themselves, as far as they were able, that the coast was clear, they began to enter upon their usual avocations. These were Kobolt, Walden, and Hernani, who, having gambled away the money which they had received from Jocelyn Loftus, came to fling their nets into the lake in the hope of catching some of that "fish" for which they received so good a price from Doctor Maravelli. Indeed, as the doctor had a general order from the German universities for as many heads as he chose to transmit for purposes of phrenological study, and as he himself was passionately devoted to the use of the dissecting-knife, Kobolt and his gang always found a ready market for the "subjects" which they might procure. They therefore had their general order from the doctor for whatsoever they might fish up from Lake Leman, and what with accidents, murders, and suicides, there was a tolerably good harvest to be reaped in this way throughout the year.

Having arranged their tackle, they proceeded to drag in the usual manner, and in a few minutes they brought up a dead body.

"Why, this is good luck indeed!" said Kobolt, as they drew the corpse under the jetty. "Now, then, Walden, you be off and get down the cart."

"All right," said the individual thus addressed, and away he sped.

"Come, I don't like to be idle," said Kobolt to Hernani, "let us have another throw. Not that it is at all likely we shall get a second bite to our hooks on this occasion."

"Why not?" asked the Italian. "It's all a chapter of accidents, and in the same way that for weeks together we have fished every night without dragging up anything, so have we also now and then got a couple of bites on the same night. Come, let us go and drag the other side."

Having despoiled the corpse of the money and watch in the pockets, and taken a ring from the finger, congratulating themselves at the same time upon the value of the booty, the two men passed under the pier, and proceeded to fling their tackle on the side which they now reached.

Good luck again attended them, and in a few minutes they brought another corpse to the shore. Their savage joy was now indeed great, the more so as this one likewise had gold in its pockets, a watch and chain in the fob, and a couple

of rings on the fingers. But while they were yet despoiling it, the mist was swept somewhat away by one of those sudden squalls which often gush over the surface of Lake Leman, and the moonbeams poured fully down upon the face of the dead.

Ejaculations of amazement burst simultaneously from the lips of the two fishers of men as they at once recognized that countenance.

"It is Smith, the Englishman!" said Kobolt. "And look, murder has been done, his shirt-front is stained with blood. See, it is not slime, and the water has not washed it out. Ah! the blood is evidently flowing still, and the corpse is as fresh as it can be. Why, this must have been done within an hour!"

"Come, don't let us stand dallying here," growled Hernani, "but drag the body underneath the pier until the cart comes."

This they did, and then, as their curiosity was now acutely sharpened, they drew forth the other corpse just far enough into the moonlight to enable them to examine it closely. Their astonishment was enhanced even into dismay on at once recognizing the other Englishman, whom they knew by the name of Thompson, and who it was evident had likewise been murdered. But the latter had been shot through the head, for the mark was upon the brow where the bullet had entered, and the skull was shattered where it had passed out again.

"Some fearful work has been done here this evening," said Kobolt. "What can it all mean? How can it be?"

"I suppose," replied Hernani, "that if we were to stand here conjecturing for a month we should not find out. But when I come to think of it, we ought to be grateful to those who have done the deed, for in a very little time it has put a handsome booty in our way."

"Hush! I hear footsteps advancing," suddenly ejaculated Kobolt.

Then, having hastily dragged back the corpse of Malpas under the pier, they peeped forth from behind the massive and crowded piles. The moonlight was still pouring down upon the scene, and they were thus enabled to observe a female form approaching the spot. The rays fell upon the woman's countenance as she glanced quickly around in every

direction, and as the keen eyes of Kobolt recognized her, he whispered to his comrade, " It is one of the old ladies belonging to the villa, that we carried off to Lausanne."

" Perhaps, then," immediately suggested Hernani, also in a whisper, " she has had something to do with this murder of the very two men who employed us on that night, the occasion you speak of."

" Well, we have got nothing to do with all that," said Kobolt. " Let us speak to her."

They accordingly issued forth from beneath the pier and accosted Mrs. Ranger, for she it was. Instantaneously recognizing the two men, she at once told them it was they of whom she was in search. Kobolt laconically asked what she wanted, and she without much circumlocution proposed to them a certain thing, backing her explanation with the promise of a large reward. The amount thus named was tempting in the extreme, and the villains were not long in closing with her. As a matter of course she said nothing relative to the murders which the fishers of men had just discovered at the jetty, for the simple reason that she knew nought about them, and they did not think it worth while to intimate the subject to her, although in their own minds they felt pretty well convinced she was no stranger to the two dark deeds. In this surmise, however, they were utterly wrong, as the reader is already aware.

The interview between Mrs. Ranger and the two fishers of men did not occupy a quarter of an hour. Where the employer in a proposed crime is cool, collected, and determined, and the employed are willing, bribable, and ready, there is no need of many words. Thus was it that the bargain was soon made. An earnest of the price was placed in Kobolt's hand, a full understanding as to the mode of procedure was entered into, and Mrs. Ranger sped back to the villa, muttering to herself, " The remedies I am adopting are desperate, but the position in which I am placed is also desperate. Murder must secure my impunity, and murder will do it."

Thus congratulating herself on the means she had devised and was prepared to carry out, the harridan reëntered the royal dwelling.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DISSECTING-ROOM

It was about half-past eleven on this memorable night, and Doctor Maravelli was seated alone in his little parlour opening from the hall.

Loftus was in his own chamber, pondering upon the plan which he was putting into execution, and settling in his mind as to the exact details of the course which he should pursue when the three sisters were to make their appearance at midnight. As for the Countess of Curzon and Lady Prescott, they were also sitting up, for they had not as yet dared to retire to rest, each deeply feeling that after the crime which had been consummated no sleep would visit their pillows. They were therefore holding companionship in the drawing-room, endeavouring to look satisfied at the tremendous work they had done, but unable to conceal from each other the fact that they now would give worlds to have it all undone again.

Return we, however, to Maravelli, who was alone in his parlour. But what was he doing there? Upon the table at which he was seated stood a phial labelled "Poison." That venomous drug had he been compounding in his secret laboratory up-stairs, and having brought it down with him to the parlour, he was now contemplating it with the air of a man who has obtained the means of accomplishing a certain object but trembles at the bare idea of using it. Not that it was so much the criminality of the contemplated deed which thus made him waver in his purpose, but it was the dread of being found out. Nevertheless, having duly weighed all the considerations that presented themselves to his mental view, he made up his mind to do the deed, for imagination suggested no other avenue of escape from

the perils which threatened him, and which involved the hideous punishment of branding with a red-hot iron, to be followed by a long term of imprisonment.

But how was he to accomplish his murderous purpose? He thought of a thousand different plans. One was to mix some agreeable drink, infuse the poison therein, and take it up to his intended victims, as if it were an act of a host's courtesy that he was performing. But no, this would not do. They might suspect, or they might refuse to drink at all, or the draughts might be partaken of by others beneath the roof. Moreover, as Lady Prescott was not alone, but had the other lady lodger with her in the drawing-room, such a plan could not be carried out now, and the doctor felt that he could not visit her with a draught in her bedroom, after she had retired to rest, without exciting suspicion by the very impropriety of the act itself. Much less dared he send her up a draught by his housekeeper, whom he would not trust in these dark schemes which he was now contemplating. Then how was he to proceed? To wait till the morning and poison the coffee which Loftus and Lady Prescott would partake of at breakfast! No, this plan was not feasible. Opportunity might not serve, and, moreover, it would be dangerous to delay the deed and let the night pass without consummating it. Then how was he to act? He knew of no better, safer, or surer course than to enter their rooms respectively when they slept, and pour the poison between their lips, for it was of so fatal a nature that a single drop reaching the tongue would be followed by instantaneous death.

Yes, this must be the plan which he would adopt, and, having resolved upon it, he was about to secure the bottle in a cupboard, when a somewhat violent ring at the bell startled him. So often, at about the same period of the night, had just such a sharp, hasty ring been given before, that its meaning instantaneously struck him, and as he always made it a point to answer in person all summonses after a certain hour, he sped forth from his parlour and opened the front door. As he had anticipated, he beheld the three figures of the fishers of men, with their cart, in the narrow street.

"Ah!" he said, in a hasty whisper, "it is unfortunate you should come hither to-night, for I am particularly engaged."

"But what are we to do, then?" demanded Kobolt, gruffly. "We can't go and fling them back again into the lake, and as for taking them to our own lodgings, is out of the question."

"Them?" echoed Maravelli. "Have you more than one?"

"Yes, two fine, fresh subjects, — murdered, too."

"Then, indeed," ejaculated the doctor, nervously, "does it become all the more requisite to get them out of the way. In with them — haste — lose no time!"

The three men did not require to be thus urged on. They soon dragged the two corpses into the hall, and bore them to the dissecting-room, Maravelli carrying the candle to light them.

"Ah!" ejaculated Kobolt, as he beheld the corpse of the infant already lying on the leaden table, "so you have got that here, eh?"

"We have not a minute for unnecessary discourse," said the doctor. "I have lodgers in the house."

"Well, well," said Kobolt, "not another word. Give us the money, and we are off."

This the doctor did in such haste that he dropped a few more gold pieces than he meant to do into Kobolt's hand, but the fellow did not choose to tell him of the mistake. He and his two comrades accordingly sped away, while the doctor hastened to summon Mavolta to mop up the marks of the wet where the corpses had been dragged through the hall.

Scarcely was all this done, when Loftus came down-stairs, for it was now twelve o'clock. Encountering the doctor in the hall the moment after Mavolta had retired, he was struck by the agitated appearance of his countenance, and at once demanded, "Has anything happened?"

"Only that those fishers of men have brought me two subjects," replied Maravelli, "and I was of course obliged to have them taken into the dissecting-room."

"Well, it cannot be helped. You could not do otherwise, I suppose," said Loftus. "And now give me the key of that room."

"What! to-night?" asked the physician, who was utterly unacquainted with Jocelyn's intention relative to the Misses Owen, and who even did not know that he was expecting them.

"Yes, give me the key, I repeat," rejoined our hero, sternly. "I have visitors coming here to-night."

"Visitors?" echoed Maravelli, struck with a mortal terror, for he fancied that these visitors would prove to be the officers of justice coming to arrest him.

"Ah! they are not such visitors as you fear," said Loftus, at once penetrating his alarms. "Have I not promised that you shall be held scatheless if you do my bidding?"

"Yes, yes, you promised me," murmured the doctor, trembling from head to foot, "but —"

At this moment there was another ring at the front door bell.

"There! these are my visitors," said Loftus, impatiently. "Give me the key. I swear to you they are not officers of justice, they are only the three Owens."

"Oh, in that case take the key," said Maravelli, now breathing more freely.

"And you must remain with me, doctor," hastily rejoined Loftus, "as a witness of what is about to take place."

Our hero now hastened to open the front door, and at once gave admittance to Agatha, Emma, and Julia. They were all three enveloped in cloaks and closely veiled, being thus disguised to escape recognition during their nocturnal expedition from the villa to the physician's house, and (as they hoped) speedily back again.

The moment they entered the hall, Jocelyn closed the front door, and said, "Be pleased to follow me."

He then took up the candle which Maravelli had left standing upon a table in the hall, and at once led the way to the dining-room, keeping the physician close by him.

Be it remembered that the apartment which they had now entered was not the gloomy-looking little parlour previously alluded to, and on the table of which Maravelli had left the bottle of poison.

On entering the dining-room, Loftus closed the door, and turning toward the ladies, he said, "Have the kindness to raise your veils, that I may be assured that ye are really those whom I expect."

With this command, delivered in the firm tone of decision, the three sisters at once complied, and then Loftus beheld those three countenances which were so familiar to him, those countenances on which nature had lavished so much

beauty, but which were now pale and agitated. He also was very pale; indeed, his cheeks were colourless, while the firmness with which his lips were compressed showed that he had some difficulty in mastering his emotions and sternly carrying out that which he believed to be an imperative duty. As for Maravelli, he also was deeply agitated, for though relieved of any immediate fear on his own account, he nevertheless trembled at the strangeness of the present proceeding, and there was likewise something awful in the spectacle of that young man with the determined air of an avenging genius confronting those three pale and horror-stricken girls, at such an hour of the night, and under all the circumstances that had occurred.

"Now," said Loftus, at once resuming the discourse in the same firm voice as before, but likewise with a forced composure over a deep internal agitation, "all that is about to take place must be promptly and rapidly done. To speak the truth, I know you all three too well to believe that you can be brought to a sense of the enormity of your crimes unless under extraordinary circumstances. To the influence of such circumstances am I about to subject you, and here" — pointing to Maravelli — "is the man who, having been to a certain extent implicated in one phase of your proceedings, must perform the part of a witness now. To a chamber of horrors am I about to lead you. Prepare yourselves for a shock. You will behold some ghastly objects, but on one only need your eyes be riveted."

"Mr. Loftus!" almost shrieked forth Agatha, and she would have fallen had not her sisters supported her, "you will not, you cannot, you dare not as a man — "

"Hush, hush!" was the quick whisper which Emma breathed in Agatha's ear. "You must confess nothing, it will be safer not."

"Well, sir," said the eldest sister, regaining her fortitude at this hint, "what horrors are these which you have in preparation for us?" and she threw a ghastly look upon our young hero.

"Not for worlds," exclaimed Loftus, "would I submit you, wicked and depraved though you are, to this ordeal, if I thought you would confess everything of your own accord. Say then at once, — say then," he repeated, earnestly and impressively, "to whom were this man's services adminis-

tered" — and he again glanced toward Maravelli — "on that memorable night, three weeks ago, when a child was born within the walls of the princess's villa?"

Agatha essayed to give some answer, but her tongue refused to perform its office, and she stood gazing in silent horror upon Jocelyn Loftus.

"Ask Doctor Maravelli," said Julia, hastily, "whom he suspects to have been his patient on that memorable night."

"No," immediately exclaimed Loftus, "I require not mere suspicions, I want positive evidence. Remember, this is most serious, and the manner in which it will end depends wholly upon yourselves."

"For God's sake, go through with the ordeal, whatever it may be," whispered Emma, as she stood behind her sister Agatha, whom she half-sustained from sinking upon the carpet.

Agatha instantaneously regained a degree of composure, not so much on account of her sister Emma's encouraging words, as because a sudden idea struck herself. Indeed, she saw that if they were enabled to set Jocelyn at nought in the clue which he had obtained, it might yet be possible to have the whole matter hushed up so as to avoid the necessity of having murder done in respect to Loftus and Lady Prescott. That is to say, if they could manage to leave the circumstance of the childbirth in such doubt and mystery that the princess should still remain an object even of the remotest suspicion, then was it probable that Loftus would be most anxious to avoid public exposure. Such were the thoughts which all in an instant swept through Agatha's mind, and impressed her with the importance of nerving herself to the utmost of her power to meet any horrors and go through any ordeal that might be in store for her sisters and herself.

"Miss Owen," said Loftus, fixing his eyes searchingly upon her, "to you do I especially address the question relative to the birth of that child to which allusion has been made."

"And I, sir," she answered, with a degree of composure that now astonished herself, "refuse to give any response where the honour of a lady is so deeply implicated."

"Then tell me," said Loftus, his voice and his look now assuming the deepest, the most awe-inspiring solemnity,

" will you consent to cast your eyes upon the remains of the infant whereof I am speaking, and all three swear in the presence of the corpse that, had it lived, it would not have been able to assert the claims of nature upon either of you three sisters? "

" We are prepared thus to swear," was Agatha's reply, delivered in a voice so unnaturally firm and with a look so strangely resolute that it seemed as if such preterhuman calmness could only be the prelude to a frightful reaction.

" Come, then," said Loftus, " the sooner the ordeal is over the better. Doctor, take one of the candles and lead on."

Thus speaking, the young man opened the dining-room door, and made way for Maravelli to pass out. He then beckoned the three sisters to follow, and this they did with a degree of firmness which amazed him, although so white were their countenances that they looked like moving corpses.

On issuing into the hall, Loftus hastened to unlock the door of the dissecting-room, and still bidding Maravelli lead the way, he stood aside to see the three sisters enter before him. And they did enter, but the moment they crossed the threshold, and when the sickly odour of the dead struck upon their senses, they shuddered visibly, stopped short, and suddenly turned toward each other, as if all their unnatural courage were now giving way at the supreme moment, and they were about to cling to one another for support. But again was Emma's courage the first to revive, and also to pour its inspiration into the souls of her sisters, for she, having all that Bergami had said uppermost in her mind, was animated with a confidence which they had not the same motive for possessing.

They therefore all three once again armed themselves with the utmost of their fortitude, and in this manner did they advance into the room. Maravelli stood by, holding the light, and Jocelyn Loftus, entering immediately behind the girls, closed the door.

But, ah! what pen can depict the horror that now seized upon those unfortunate young women? Confusion and dismay, anguish and wonderment. While Agatha's eyes remained riveted upon the corpse of her child, the looks of her sisters had been thrown upon those other two dead

bodies that lay there, and as Emma at once recognized the countenance of her late paramour, Colonel Malpas, Julia recoiled in affright from the first glimpse which she caught of the features of the Earl of Curzon. Then did a succession of agonizing shrieks thrill forth, followed by hysterics and fainting.

These were the quick and alarming consequences of the tremendous spectacle. But from the ejaculations of horror and the agonizing syllables which first thrilled from the lips of Emma and Julia, Loftus at once gathered that the dead bodies which by a coincidence that almost seemed providential had been brought hither that night were those of the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas, the two young women's paramours. Cruelly distressed at the turn which the drama had thus taken, having deepened into an excess of horror which he had little foreseen and was very far from intending, he hastened to throw open the door again, and by the doctor's assistance he bore the now fainting girls, one after the other, away from the terrific scene into the dining-room. Agatha, who had instantaneously caught the infection of her two sisters' wild terrors, and whose own nerves had been so painfully distended for some hours past as to be easily unstrung all in a moment, had not swooned outright, as Emma and Julia had done, but had burst forth into a kind of hysterical delirium, in which she unconsciously made all the confessions which Jocelyn Loftus had been so desirous to obtain.

Meanwhile, as we before stated, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon, unable to retire to rest, were sitting together in the drawing-room. All on a sudden terrific cries, screams, and hysterical shrieks reached their ears, and as in their present state of mind a far less ominous circumstance than even this would have been sufficient to fill their souls with terror, they started up and exchanged looks of fearful import. Conscious guilt invariably associates with itself every occurrence that seems at all threatening, no matter how trivial or how foreign to its actual circumstances it may be. Thus was it that an indescribable horror, mingled with dread misgivings, seized at once upon the two patrician murderesses, and made them spring up from their seats as if suddenly galvanized. The screams continuing, the two ladies went forth on the landing. They heard the names of Curzon and Malpas thrilling forth upon voices fraught with

rending anguish, and now their souls seemed to burn with the scathing effects of ineffable terror. The voice of the doctor was heard vociferating to Mavolta to bring water, vinegar, and smelling-salts; and the quick sounds of footsteps through the hall, as the physician and Jocelyn conveyed the wretched girls to the dining-room, all tended to prove that something unusual, strange, and extraordinary was going on.

Wild with alarm, and their feelings now excited to a pitch utterly beyond endurance, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon descended the stairs. On reaching the hall, they beheld two doors standing open, and from both of which lights were streaming. One of these doors Lady Prescott had never seen open before all the time she had been at the doctor's house, and perceiving that the other door which stood open was that of the dining-room, it naturally struck her that the shrieks of anguish she had heard had proceeded from the former place ere those who had uttered them were borne into the latter apartment. Quick as thought alone can travel did this idea strike her, and, impelled by a curiosity now excited to a fearful, indeed, to an awful pitch, she hastened toward that door which stood open at the end of the passage leading from the hall. Lady Curzon, inspired by kindred feelings, mechanically followed her, and together did they enter the dissecting-room, where the candle which Maravelli had left upon the table at once showed them the fearful objects that lay stretched on that anatomical board.

For the corpse of the child they had no eyes or thoughts. All their attention, all their interest, all their ideas were in a moment riveted and absorbed in the dread spectacle of their two murdered victims lying there stretched out before them.

For nearly a minute did they stand gazing in mute horror, their countenances ghastly pale, and with a paleness, too, which settling upon their olive complexions gave to their features a corpselike hue similar to the faces of the dead. Then, as if simultaneously seized with the same goading terror, they turned away, exchanging a quick look of indescribable feelings, and passed forth into the hall again. As they proceeded side by side along the passage, they threw quick, shuddering glances over their shoulders, in dire apprehension lest something should be following close behind.

In the confusion and dismay which prevailed inside the dining-room, where Mavolta and the doctor were administering restoratives to Emma and Julia, and where Agatha was giving vent to her hysterical revealings, the door, as already stated, had been left open. The eldest sister's confessions were at this moment absorbing the entire attention of Jocelyn Loftus, and he observed not that the door was thus open, neither did he hear the sounds of footsteps nor the rustling of garments as Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon were staggering past that open door, scarcely knowing whither they went, but both alike a prey to feelings which defied description.

The door of the sombre-looking little parlour, of which we have frequently spoken, was also standing ajar, and a light glimmered from within. Mechanically did the two ladies enter there, for they felt that their limbs were failing them and that they must sink with the exhaustion of terror and dismay unless they reached some place where they could sit down. Lady Prescott threw herself into an armchair, an example which was instantaneously followed by the Countess of Curzon. Then with hollow eyes did they gaze upon each other, as if to ask what was to be done, for they both felt profoundly and terribly conscious of danger, although they knew not how to define it or whence it was to come.

"The lake has given up its dead," whispered Lady Prescott, in accents low and hollow. "Is not this ominous of something dreadful?"

"Yes, my God! dreadful, dreadful!" returned Editha, wringing her hands. "Oh, that the work of the last few hours could be undone!"

"Know you," asked Lady Prescott, under the influence of a tremendous consternation, "what is the punishment in Geneva — for — for —"

"For the crime of murder?" added Lady Curzon, mechanically.

"Yes, the guillotine," answered Lady Prescott, with wild, staring eyes.

"O horror!" rejoined the wretched Editha, shuddering with an ice-chill from head to foot.

"Ah!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, as her eye fell upon the bottle which stood on the table.

"What is it?" quickly demanded the countess. Then, as she also caught sight of the label, she said, "Here, give it to me. It is Satan himself who has put it in my way. I am tired of life — I am frightened to live. The guillotine — my God! The guillotine — oh, no, no!"

And seizing the bottle from Lady Prescott's hand, the Countess of Curzon applied it to her lips.

"Ah! leave enough for me also," cried Lady Prescott, snatching the phial from her; but for a moment she stood transfixed with horror as she beheld the Countess of Curzon sink suddenly back in her chair and with one deep groan give up the ghost, for the poison was rapid and fatal in its effects as the dart of the angel of death.

All imaginable horrors, ten thousand times more fearful than any which had yet seized on the wretched Lady Prescott, now crowded in upon her. Death in every shape seemed to be within that house, — death in the dissecting-room, death now in this gloomy parlour, before her eyes and in her imagination, death out-of-doors, in the middle of the great square of Geneva, and on the scaffold of the guillotine. Oh, the guillotine — heavens! what a thrill of ice-like agony did the idea, as it again flashed to her mind, send through her entire form, so that maddened, frenzied, driven wild with the pressure of intolerable thoughts, the unhappy lady raised the phial to her lips and poured the residue of its contents down her throat. The effect was blasting as a flash of lightning. Not more quickly does the thunderstroke of apoplexy perform its tremendous work — and down she fell, a corpse.

Meantime the hysterical cries which still came thrilling from Agatha's lips and went penetrating through the entire house reached the ears of the Countess of Curzon's lady's-maid, who slept on an upper story. This was none other than Gertrude, the handsome and wily Gertrude, who is already so well known to our readers. Terrified and dismayed at those sounds of female anguish which struck cry after cry, and with shriek following shriek, in quick succession upon her ears, she leaped forth from her couch, hastily threw on some clothing, and descended the stairs. Guided by the cries, she came down as far as the hall, and halting near the dining-room door, listened to what was taking place within. She heard Agatha's unconscious and hysterical confessions, —

how it was indeed she who had given birth to the child whose corpse was in the dissecting-room, and Gertrude shuddered as she thus listened to those wild ravings relative to the dead.

While casting her eyes in the vagueness of a growing terror around, she observed the other doors which stood open, and catching a glimpse of the sinister shapes that lay on the table in the dissecting-room, thither was she impelled by a fearful curiosity, as terrible as it was irresistible. Entering that room, she beheld the child to which allusion had just been made in her hearing, and she also beheld the two corpses that lay stretched on the same table. Heavens! one was Malpas, her mistress's enemy, and the other was her mistress's husband. Yes, there was the Earl of Curzon, stark and lifeless, — he who had revelled in the virginity of Gertrude's own charms, there he lay, a mere inanimate heap.

Gertrude stood confounded. Of the double crime perpetrated that night by her mistress and Lady Prescott at the old jetty, she knew not; therefore well indeed might she be amazed and thus transfixed with mingled wonderment and horror on beholding those two corpses stretched out there. Staggering away, not knowing what to think, scarcely daring to think at all, but with terrible suspicions springing up in her mind, she retraced her steps into the hall, and, still guided by the irresistible feeling of curiosity which amounted almost to a presentiment, she advanced toward the parlour door. But now, as she reached the threshold of that sombre-looking little room, a cry, a wild and terrible cry, thrilling high above the hysterical outpourings of Agatha in the dining-room, burst agonizingly from the lips of the lady's-maid, as with the first glance her eyes embraced all the horrors of the scene. For there sat her mistress in a large armchair, already livid and ghastly with the changing hues of a death produced by a quick and powerful poison, while on the floor, with glassy eyes that seemed to stare up at her awfully, was stretched Lady Prescott, also becoming hideous beneath the finger of death.

Something seemed to give way in Gertrude's brain as she sent forth that thrilling, rending, piercing cry; then she stood motionless and silent for a few instants, and then, as persons issued from the drawing-room, the horrible laugh of a maniac burst from her lips.

Oh, this indeed was a night of horrors at Maravelli's house! The suicide of the two ladies seemed the crowning act of the tremendous drama thus represented there. Jocelyn and the doctor were the two persons who had rushed forth from the dining-room on hearing Gertrude's yelling cry, and we need scarcely say that they were overwhelmed with unutterable dismay on beholding the tragedy which had taken place. Loftus was the first to recover his presence of mind, and in a few quick but impressive words he conjured the doctor to summon likewise all his fortitude to his aid, inasmuch as it was absolutely necessary to conceal from the three sisters this new incident which had occurred, lest the accumulation of so much horror upon horror, beneath the same roof and within the same hour, should prove more than their minds could possibly bear up against.

Mavolta was accordingly summoned forth from the dining-room to take charge of Gertrude, now a laughing, senseless maniac, and the unhappy creature was induced to follow the old housekeeper up the stairs. The door of the little parlour was closed on the corpses of the two suicide ladies; and all this having been done in the course of a few minutes, the doctor and Loftus returned into the dining-room, where the three sisters were now huddling together upon a sofa and endeavouring to imbibe confidence from each other's presence, as well as collect their ideas so as to look their actual position in the face. For Agatha had by this time grown calm, yielding to the consolations, the entreaties, and the prayers of her two sisters, who had been recovered from the fainting condition into which they had fallen.

"Young ladies," said Loftus, on returning into the room with the doctor, "you need remain here no longer than you choose."

"But what are we to expect, Mr. Loftus? What are we to anticipate?" inquired Agatha, who was still nervous and trembling all over.

"You must prepare to quit Geneva to-morrow," answered Jocelyn. "Understand me well, to-morrow must yourselves" — and he glanced rapidly at the three sisters one after the other — "take your departure from this city in company with Mrs. Ranger. Now you understand me, and I have no more to say. Unless, indeed," he added, after an instant's pause, "you feel that in consequence of the terrible scenes

which have taken place you would rather remain here for a while longer."

"No, no," cried Emma, impatiently, for now that her fortitude was returning, she recollected her appointment with Bergami. "Let us hasten hence this moment. Agatha, Julia," she added, in quick whispers, to her two sisters, "let us depart now directly."

They all three accordingly signified their desire to go thence, and Loftus, taking the candle in his hand, conducted them to the front door without uttering another word. But just as they were about to issue forth, he bethought himself of something which he ought to say in his own justification, for not even to such vile, depraved, and heartless girls as these did he choose to appear in the light of a man capable of unnecessary cruelty.

"One moment," he said, just closing the door ajar ere the three sisters stepped forth from the house. "It is due to myself to inform you that the additional horrors of that room" — and he glanced toward the dissecting apartment — "formed no portion of my plan. Had I known whose remains those were that had been brought in by the resurrectionists of the lake, not for an instant should I have suffered you to enter thither."

Having thus spoken, he again opened the door, and the three sisters, drawing down their veils and huddling close together, issued forth from Maravelli's house just as the neighbouring church clock was chiming a quarter to one. Thus was it that they had passed through three-quarters of an hour of horrible feelings and rending mental tortures within those walls, and the silence, the darkness, and the loneliness of the by-street into which they now emerged constituted an indescribable relief after the whirl of harrowing emotions they had experienced.

After having thus afforded egress to the three sisters, Jocelyn Loftus hastened back into the dining-room where he had left Maravelli, and to whom he now said, "I am going out for an hour or two."

"Going out!" echoed the doctor, all his suspicions of evil suddenly reviving.

"Tranquillize yourself, I shall be back in a couple of hours, long before the city awakes for the business of a new day. Doctor Maravelli," added our hero, in a solemn voice, and

with a still more solemn look, " the last hour has been one of horrors such as I never knew before, such as God grant that I may never know again. Our duty is clear and apparent. So soon as the police courts are open, we must repair to the authorities and relate everything that has occurred."

" Everything? " cried Maravelli, with haggard look.

" Depend upon it," rejoined Loftus, " I will save you from any unpleasant consequences. I have promised you this already, and I will keep my word."

He then put on his hat, muffled himself in a cloak, and issued forth from the physician's house.

Meanwhile the three sisters were hastening back to the villa. Emma, who relied upon the protection of Bergami, but who did not choose to inform her sisters of all that had taken place between herself and him, said everything she could think of to inspire them with an equal amount of courage and assurance. She represented to them that now the ordeal was past, the worst was known, and that all the harm or exposure Loftus intended them was their prompt exile from Geneva.

" But even this decision may be counteracted," added Emma, in a peculiar tone of assurance, which was derived from the secret reliance she placed in Bergami.

Through the eldest sister's frame, however, did a sudden thrill of horror sweep as she recalled to mind Mrs. Ranger's injunction relative to Loftus and Lady Prescott. " If they are to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli; but if they are to die, then nothing need be said and the doctor will do his work."

Such were the words Mrs. Ranger had whispered to Agatha during their interview of the evening, but the word had not been breathed in Maravelli's ear, and he therefore would do his work.

Ah! if Agatha only knew that Lady Prescott was already no more, that the poison had been used by suicide lips, and that Maravelli no longer dreamed of new crimes, but only thought of shielding the past ones, she would have been spared this fresh paroxysm of horror and dismay which now seized upon her. But, stricken speechless thereby, she gave no audible vent to her feelings, and as she thus walked with her two sisters in silence, they in the obscurity of night observed not the ghastly workings of her countenance.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST ACT OF THE NIGHT'S TRAGEDY

It is here necessary to remind the reader that when Bergami had absented himself from the dinner-table at the villa, under pretence of dining with a friend, it was for the purpose of hastening to Doctor Maravelli's house and making Jocelyn Loftus acquainted with all that had taken place during the few hours since they parted in the middle of the day. Thus Bergami had informed our hero of all the strange and startling revelations which he had wrung from Mrs. Hubbard, and all that had taken place between himself and the three sisters on the shore of the lake. He had also explained to Loftus, word for word, what he had said and done when left alone with Emma Owen, and ere they parted it was then agreed that Loftus should repair to the villa during the night, immediately after his interview should have taken place with the three young ladies at Doctor Maravelli's.

It was in pursuance of this understanding with Bergami that Jocelyn Loftus was now wending his way from the physician's house toward the villa, and while the three sisters were returning thither by the most direct route, our hero was taking the more circuitous path across the field. But then, as he proceeded at a much quicker pace than the Misses Owen, he arrived at the point of destination before them.

On reaching the private door in the garden wall, he knocked three times, and it was immediately opened by Bergami, who had been there awaiting his coming for the last half-hour. In a few hurried words Jocelyn related to the royal equerry all the dreadful things that had occurred, and how the drama of the night had episodically merged

into a terrific tragedy in respect to Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon. Bergami was horror-stricken on hearing of these frightful incidents, but as there was now little leisure for comment, he proceeded without loss of time to conduct Jocelyn into the villa. Ascending the back staircase together, they trod noiselessly, so as not to attract attention in case the sisters should have already entered or Mrs. Ranger should be upon the alert. But all was still, no one appeared, and Bergami led the way to his own chamber.

"I have come," said Jocelyn, as he threw off his cloak and hat, "because of the appointment which we made, but I should scarcely think that Emma will have the hardihood to perform the part which she promised you, considering everything that has occurred."

"But methought you said in the garden ere now," observed Bergami, "that you concealed the crowning tragedy from the sisters in consideration of their state of mind?"

"I did so," answered Loftus. "But the spectacle of her murdered paramour —"

"Murdered, did you say?" cried Bergami, starting with horror.

"Yes, Colonel Malpas and also the Earl of Curzon were most foully murdered," rejoined our hero. "The marks of the fatal wounds were upon them — Ah! and must we not associate the suicide of those ladies with the dread crime of murder committed upon these two men?"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Bergami, "what horrors are growing out of these adventures wherein we are engaged! But did the spectacle of her murdered paramour produce so very powerful an impression upon Emma?"

"Rather of horror than of grief," rejoined Loftus. "I noticed, moreover, that she was the first to resume her fortitude —"

"Then depend upon it she will keep her appointment with me to-night," interrupted Bergami.

"You speak with confidence, baron," said Loftus, "and I hope that it will prove as you conjecture. For if this one point be cleared up, then are our investigations complete in all their details. Agatha confessed, as I ere now told you in the garden, that she was the mother of the babe. She moreover admitted in her ravings that it was her sisters who

personated the princess in the ermine cloak and the green silk hood, which they had been enabled by their position about the royal person to borrow for the specific occasions when they were used."

"Oh, what refinement of atrocious perfidy!" exclaimed the baron, trembling with indignation.

"Let our consolation be that we have unravelled the complicated skein so successfully," observed Loftus, "and now it is the last knot which we are about to untie — that is to say, if Emma should really come."

"I am convinced of it," said Bergami, with the same air of confidence as before. "That young woman is devoured with insatiable passions; she is a perfect Messalina in her desires. Ah! Mr. Loftus, you can understand me when I assure you that never, never did I do such violence to my feelings in every respect as when affecting to fall into the snare which that siren spread for me. I hated the hypocrisy of the part which I was playing, hated it all the more bitterly because I was compelled to assume the passion of love where I in reality experienced nought but loathing and aversion. For beautiful as that young creature is, yet did her very touch send a cold shudder through me as if from the contact of a reptile. At the time that I was playing that hypocritical part and forcing myself to enact the character of a gross sensualist, it seemed to me as if I were committing a crime. And then to permit her even for a moment to enfold me in her embrace — O God! it was dreadful!" and the strong aversion which penetrated through Bergami's accents and looks showed how really and truly his exalted nature recoiled from the degrading sensuality belonging to the part which he had enacted. "But I had assured you, Mr. Loftus," he continued, "that I would have recourse to every means in order to further our views, for it was the honour of a persecuted and injured princess that had to be vindicated, and I was therefore prepared to go any lengths and make any sacrifice of my own feeling in order to accomplish that aim. I can assure you, however, it was the martyrdom of all my manly sense of propriety when I allowed myself to be pressed to that luxurious wanton's bosom. And it is because she is this utter profligate, this lascivious creature that you and I both know her to be, it is for this reason, I say, that she will presently forget all the horrors of the last

few hours, and giving the reins to her imagination, think of abandoning herself only to voluptuous delights."

"We shall see," observed Jocelyn. "The night is wearing on, they must have returned by this time, and if she mean to seek your chamber she will be here soon."

Baron Bergami was right. Even while retracing her way with her sisters from Maravelli's house to the villa did Emma give full scope to her licentious imaginings. She thought within herself that the pains of the night being over, the hour for its pleasures was now approaching, and in Bergami's arms did she hope to reap the reward of all that she had just undergone.

The three sisters stealthily reëntered the villa, and immediately separating from each other, they sought their respective chambers. But Agatha, according to previous understanding, repaired in the first instance to Mrs. Ranger's room, and there she found the old harridan sitting up and anxiously awaiting her return. There was a screen drawn around one corner of the chamber, and as Agatha entered, Mrs. Ranger pointed significantly in that direction. A cold shudder thrilled through the young lady's frame as she full easily comprehended what the sign meant, namely, that Kobolt and his two companions were concealed behind that screen.

"Now, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, of course speaking in English and also in a low voice, "tell me in as few words as you can all that has taken place."

The young lady sat down on a chair close to the old one, and rapidly outlined the horrors through which she and her sisters had passed, as a matter of course not forgetting to describe how they had beheld the forms of the murdered Curzon and Malpas stretched upon the table in the doctor's dissecting-room. Mrs. Ranger was astounded at this portion of the narrative, the crime being characterized by so much real mystery in every respect. But she was not a woman likely to devote much time to speculation and conjecture when it became necessary to act with decision. She accordingly asked, "How stands the matter, Agatha? What words spoke you in Maravelli's ear?"

"I said nothing," was the response. "I was too much the prey to the wildest emotions of terro and grief to be

able to settle my thoughts on any particular point. It quite escaped me, in the whirl of my ideas, that the lives of Loftus and Lady Prescott were, so to speak, in my own hand."

"Well, then, it is perhaps all for the better," said Mrs. Ranger, with the doggedness of determination. "Dead people tell no tales, and therefore it is better that the tongues of Loftus and Lady Prescott should be silenced than that we should be at their mercy. Since you did not speak the word, Maravelli will do his work. And now," she added, with an emphasis and a look both alike of darkest meaning, "I shall do mine."

"You — you — are resolved, then?" faltered Agatha, glancing with uncontrollable horror toward the screen, from behind which the rustling of garments and the whispering of coarse voices came.

"To be sure," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "If Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die to-night, how is it possible to allow Bergami to live?"

Agatha spoke not another word, but for nearly a minute she stood gazing in vacant terror upon Mrs. Ranger, not only in astonishment at the extraordinary firmness of that woman at other times so frivolous and full of affectations, but also as much as to ask whether it was possible that a murder so foul, so cold-blooded, was to be done that night within the walls of the villa.

"Retire, Agatha, retire," said Mrs. Ranger, at length, "and in less than half an hour from this time all will be over."

Agatha still remained speechless; her tongue was parched, her throat was dry, as if she had been swallowing ashes, and yet it seemed that if she even for a single moment relaxed the strong hold that she was maintaining upon her feelings, she must give full vent to her anguish in one long, loud, and penetrating scream.

Mrs. Ranger pushed her gently toward the door, and Agatha, quitting the chamber, dragged herself along the passage to her own room, where, locking the door, she threw herself upon the couch, and burying her face in the pillow to stifle her cries, gave vent to all the tremendous anguish that for the last quarter of an hour had gathered and remained pent up in her almost bursting bosom.

Meanwhile the voluptuous Emma, immediately on gaining her own apartments, had hastened to throw off her apparel. Then unlocking a wardrobe, she took thence a frock coat, a military stock, a pair of trousers with a stripe of gold lace on the outward seam of each leg, a pair of Wellington boots, and a hat.

If any one could have peeped into the chamber at this moment and beheld that young woman undoing her feminine toilet and preparing for her masculine one, it would have been impossible to believe that she had gone through such a severe trial as she had so recently experienced. Upon her countenance was no trace of those feelings which had ere now been so vividly excited at Maravelli's house. On the contrary, the flush of a blissful animation was upon her cheeks, the light of pleasure flashed from beneath the silken fringes of her hazel eyes, a sunny smile sat upon her lips, which, so far from being dry and feverish with recent horror, were moist as wet coral and delicious as a rich, pulpy fruit. Her bosom rose and fell with quick heavings, but not indicative of either affliction or alarm. No, those voluptuous undulations of that superb bust were produced by the anticipations of love's delight which fired the soul within.

She disapparelled herself, we say, of all her feminine gear, and then began to assume the masculine garb which she knew became her so well. Even to her very corset had she laid aside, and though the rich contours of her bust depended not upon artificial support or compression for their shape, roundness, or firmness, yet was it now easier to imprison those glowing globes of snow within the tightly fitting frock coat. The Wellington boots, made with such exquisite delicacy, fitted her beautifully shaped feet in the most faultless manner, the upper leathers ascending to the middle of the swell of her robust but admirably modelled legs. The pantaloons, however, were made somewhat wide and with large plaits, so as to conceal the feminine shapeliness of the limbs, and give them the appearance of that undeviating straightness which especially characterizes the male figure. Her hair was arranged in such a manner as to flow in a luxuriant mass upon her shoulders, and when this was done, she proceeded by the aid of gum-water to fasten a pair of false whiskers in their proper place. This she did with an air so coquettish, so full of arch delight, that it was

less possible than ever to believe she had undergone such exciting fluctuations of feeling during the few past hours. But now came another of the finishing touches to the masculine toilet, namely, the fastening on of the exquisitely fashioned false moustache. Above her short upper lip did she affix it in the most artistic manner, and then, as she gazed at herself in the mirror, with that delicately pencilled, glossy, and curling appendage to her luscious mouth, she fancied that it gave a more mischievous expression to her features and a delightful archness to her smile. Resplendent as pearls already were her beautiful teeth, but if it were possible, that dark moustache made them appear still more brilliant by the contrast; and when she fastened below the nether lip, just where the chin formed its beauteous dimple, another little artificial contrivance of hair to serve as an imperial, her delight became absolutely childish. Indeed, as she surveyed herself in the full-length mirror before which her masculine toilet was achieved, she looked like a radiant being without a care, and who had never even known what a ruffled feeling was, dressing for some masquerade where she was to enjoy the full measure of characteristic delight.

Long as it has taken us to describe the process of this toilet, it did not occupy Emma above twenty minutes altogether, and now, as she threw a last look at herself, she murmured, with an air of supreme satisfaction, "Never did this attire seem to become me so much before."

And truly it did become her well, setting forth the exquisite symmetry of her shape without concealing its feminine contours. Indeed, it could be but at a distance, or in an obscure light, and when only a hasty glance was thrown upon her, that she could be taken for one of the male sex, much less Bergami himself, whose noble height she altogether wanted. Besides, it were easy to perceive, when gazing close or in a clear light, that she was a female disguised, not merely from the delicacy, the softness, and the polish of her skin, nor from the seductive look of wantonness which beamed in her mischievous eyes and shed the subdued light of soft sensuousness over her entire countenance, whiskered and moustached though it were, but it was also from the rich development of that bust which the tight fitting frock could not possibly flatten and only partially restrain and compress. But even as she drew herself up to her full height,

and, by throwing back her shoulders, endeavoured to make the most of a stature which was not even tall for a woman, it seemed as if with the expansion thus given to the chest the glowing orbs would burst forth from their prisonage, and in this manner did the projecting development of bust, apart from all other circumstances above detailed, betray the woman in the masculine garb.

We will not, however, linger at greater length upon a portraiture which assuredly had its delicious attractions. Sad, oh, sad, indeed is it to reflect that this creature so lovely was not so virtuous as she was beautiful, that this being so seductive was not so chaste as she was fascinating.

The masculine toilet, then, being completed, Emma Owen prepared to sally forth from her chamber. One last look did she fling upon the mirror where her symmetrical and, at the same time, voluptuous shape was so faithfully reproduced upon the polished surface, and with her spirits elevated to the highest pitch through the very feeling of satisfaction which she experienced, she turned away and issued from the room. Ah! how her heart palpitated now with the anticipation of ineffable joys, as she pictured to herself the handsome Bergami, who, as she thought, was in a few brief minutes to strain her, warm, palpitating, and glowing with love and passion, in his arms, that handsome Bergami whose miniature counterpart she had apparelled herself to seem!

The passage was feebly, very feebly lighted by the lamp that burned there, but which was now flickering toward extinction. Indeed, the gloom was so deep that it would have been impossible to discern a figure a dozen yards ahead. All was silent in the villa, silent as the grave, as Emma stole with noiseless steps along the corridor.

But suddenly she pauses and listens. That deep silence has just been broken by a sound as of the turning of the handle of a door. Yes, she cannot be mistaken, it is so, and, moreover, it is the door of Mrs. Ranger's rooms whence the sound emanates. It opens, a head peeps forth, it is Mrs. Ranger's, and the next instant it is withdrawn again. But the words, "'Tis he, now in the passage!" uttered with exceeding rapidity by Mrs. Ranger inside the room reached Emma's ears, and she, instantaneously fancying that the

old lady was positively and actually taking her this time for Bergami himself, laughed inwardly as she continued her way along the passage.

Once more all was quiet. Mrs. Ranger's door had closed again, and Emma did not choose to waste a single moment in inquiring why the old lady was up still, and what she was doing when peeping forth into the passage. No, not an instant could Emma spare from the time which was now so precious, and was to be devoted as soon as possible to the delights of love.

And now the door of Bergami's apartment was gained, and Emma was about to knock gently with her delicate fingers, when she suddenly became aware of the stealthy creeping of some one near her. She turned around abruptly, and the look she threw was the last that ever flashed from her eyes in this life. For at the same moment her throat was grasped by hands of such iron strength that the cry which rose up in her terror was stifled in an instant, utterly subdued, ere even the very breath on which it was to be wafted forth could issue from the quivering lips. Simultaneously with this vigorous and effective assault, a long, sharp dagger was driven deep down into the unfortunate young woman's bosom, and penetrating her heart, death was instantaneous.

This fearful deed occupied not a minute, and so noiselessly was it performed that Mrs. Ranger, who was inside her room holding the door ajar and listening attentively, could scarcely hear the sound of even the faintest struggle. But, nevertheless, there was just a sufficiency of noise to reach the ears of Bergami and Loftus within the room at the door of which the tremendous tragedy took place. Thinking, however, it was Emma groping her way thither, perhaps in the dark, they only opened the door gently. But as the light strained forth from the chamber, what a spectacle met their view! Cries of horror burst from their lips, and at the same time their ears caught the sounds of rapidly retreating footsteps.

Then rang the alarm of murder through the house, that terrific cry bursting like the knell of doom upon the ears of startled sleepers in the depth of the night. But along the passage sped Loftus and Bergami, down the stairs they precipitated themselves, and on the landing below they

overtook the three assassins, upon whom they seized and who turned to defend themselves. Here it was pitch-dark and the struggle took place in the dense obscurity. Loftus and Bergami, having each grappled with his man, held them fast with desperate tenacity, and a third remained to attempt the rescue of friends, but dared not use his dagger to stab at random in the dark lest he should wound them instead of their assailants. As for the two men themselves who were thus seized upon, so firmly were they pinioned by our hero and the royal equerry that though violent were their struggles, yet were their arms held fast and they could not use their weapons.

In less than a minute the villa was all alive, doors were opening, female voices were heard giving vent to deafening shrieks, and the men-servants came rushing down from the uppermost stories. Lights were brought to the scene of action, and there Hernani and Walden were found safe pinioned in the grasp of Bergami and Loftus, while Kobolt, the moment the gleam of the first light flashed upon the figure of the royal equerry, was seized with so mortal a terror that he staggered against the wall, his limbs becoming as heavy as lead and disabling him from flight. For it naturally struck him that this was the same person whom but a minute or two back he had felt assured that he had left dead at the end of the passage below.

The capture of the three men was now effected without much difficulty by the aid of the domestics who appeared upon the scene, and from something which Kobolt in his terror and bewilderment let fall from his lips, Loftus and Bergami at once proceeded to Mrs. Ranger's room. They knocked at the door, and in a voice of alarm from within she asked, " Who is there? "

" Open, madam, open! " exclaimed Loftus, in a commanding tone.

" No, no, I cannot, I am undressed," half-screamed the wretched woman, all her courage breaking down in a moment, for it struck her that the murderers had been arrested and that everything was discovered.

Without another word did Bergami and Jocelyn burst open the door, and instead of finding Mrs. Ranger disapparelled, they at once perceived that she had not laid aside a single article of raiment, nor made the slightest prepara-

tion to retire to rest. From their looks did she gather the full confirmation of all her direst terrors and falling at their feet she extended her arms, crying, " Mercy, mercy! "

" Wretched woman! " exclaimed Bergami, " what horrors have you been guilty of! Murderess that you are, what pardon can there be for you? "

Mrs. Ranger heard no more, her senses were abandoning her, and with a hollow moan of deepest despair, she sank down in a deathlike swoon.

Meanwhile a distressing, oh, a wildly distressing scene had occurred close by. Alarmed along with the rest of the household by the cry of murder which Loftus and Bergami had sent forth, Agatha and Julia had issued from their chambers to find that their sister, from whom they had parted but little more than half an hour back in the fulness of vigorous health, was now a lifeless, bleeding corpse. Oh, what ineffable anguish was now experienced by those young women, and how tremendous was the remorse that sprang up in their guilty souls on perceiving at the first glance that one of the very means adopted to achieve the ruin of the princess had rebounded upon their own heads. For they understood it all: their unfortunate sister had been mistaken for Bergami, and attired in the apparel wherewith she was wont to personate him, had thus met a premature and dreadful death.

But we must draw a veil, at least for the present, over the manifold feelings excited by the incidents of this dreadful night. Suffice it to say that the police authorities were immediately fetched from Geneva, that Mrs. Ranger and the three murderers were borne off to prison, and that Agatha and Julia, now in a state bordering upon frenzy, were left at the villa under the surveillance of an officer of justice.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SPONGING-HOUSE

In a dirty, dingy-looking, dust-begrimed parlour at Mr. Moses Ikey's sponging-house in Fetter Lane Mr. Emmerson was pacing to and fro. Bars were at the windows, and though the sun was shining brightly, for it was midday, its beams were deadened by the dirty medium of the window-panes, which appeared as if they had not been washed outside since the last rain, a fortnight back, while their inner side appeared utterly innocent of any contact with water at all. The furniture was heavy and massive, but in a sadly neglected condition; indeed, it was impossible to walk a step on the carpet without raising a cloud of dust, or to place the finger anywhere without leaving a spot where the dust was thus lifted away.

The door was kept locked, and whenever Mr. Emmerson wanted anything, he had to ring the bell about a dozen times before the summons was answered. Then, when a dirty girl with red hair and an unmistakable Hebrew physiognomy did condescend to make her appearance, she took double the time to procure what he asked for. If he required to take exercise, he had to descend into a little yard at the back of the house, about sixteen feet wide by thirty in length, and having an arched iron grating overhead, so that it seemed like walking to and fro in a cage.

Exactly three weeks had Mr. Emmerson been at the sponging-house, raising heaven and earth to extricate himself from his pecuniary difficulties, in order that he might escape out of the country before the forgery should be discovered. But each day beheld his position growing more and more hopeless, and refusals as well as rebuffs came from every quarter to which he thought of applying. He had induced

his wife to make an earnest appeal to her relations for a loan, but here again a negative was experienced. Executions were put into the house at Clapham, everything was swept away, furniture, plate, horses, carriages, all the emblems, symbols, and appurtenances of luxury and ostentation, away they went. The ruin was complete, and Mrs. and Miss Emmerson, after having cut such a dash in that neighbourhood, were compelled to sneak away in a hackney-coach after dusk, a trunk and a bandbox containing the few articles of clothing which they had been enabled to abstract from the greedy grasp of the sheriff's officers. Then taking refuge in a small furnished lodging in Fetter Lane, so as to be near Emmerson, the unhappy women were taught the bitter lesson of overweening pride in its ignominious fall.

Three weeks, we say, had Emmerson been in the sponging-house, and so far from progressing a step toward emancipating himself from his difficulties, each day, each hour, beheld him sinking more deeply down. It is true that he had nearly two thousand guineas about his person, and the fact of which he could not conceal from his wife and daughter, although he begrudged them the few shillings which he doled out for their support. He husbanded every farthing as closely as he could, in the hope of being enabled to settle with his detaining creditor, so as to quit the country ere the forgery should be discovered, for in those times the punishment of forgery was death.

It was noon, on the twenty-first day of his captivity, that we thus find him pacing to and fro with agitated step in the private room at the sponging-house. Be it remembered that the forged bill was drawn at twenty-one days' after date, but then there were the three days' grace, and it wanted then exactly these three days to the time when the discovery of the forgery would be inevitable. Three days had the wretched Emmerson to save himself from the scaffold. Heavens, what a brief interval for the accomplishment of so gigantic a task! And the guilty man felt that it was so. Hence the fearful state of excitement in which we now find him, pacing to and fro, turning and turning with a restless, horrible anxiety.

He had sent his wife to make a communication to his detaining creditor, which he hoped would have the effect of inducing that individual to come to terms, and he was now

awaiting, in excruciating suspense, the issue of his wife's errand. Presently she returned, and the moment she made her appearance in the room, Emmerson devoured her with his inquiring eyes.

She was an affected, vulgar woman, of no very prepossessing appearance, and even in her poverty still clung to a certain tawdriness which but ill supplied the place of vanished splendour. Throwing herself upon a chair, she began by complaining bitterly of the dreadful nuisance of having to walk through the crowded streets after having been accustomed to ride in her carriage, but Emmerson cut her short by demanding sharply whether she had seen his detaining creditor.

" Yes, I have," she answered, apparently indifferent to her husband's acute suspense, which she could not fail to perceive, although she was very far from suspecting the crime whose terrors had rendered it so poignant.

" Well, what did you tell him, and what did he say? " demanded Emmerson, sharply. " Will he come to terms? Yes or no? "

" I can't say for positive," was the response given by his wife. " He will send up and let you know presently."

" Presently! Good God! more suspense, more agony of waiting! " muttered Emmerson to himself, and for a moment he felt that he could have screamed out, that he could have fastened his hands in his hair and torn it by the roots, as if, indeed, he were going mad; but subduing his emotions with a mighty effort which in itself was agony, he turned again to his wife, saying, " Tell me everything, what you said to him, how he took it, how he looked, the very words he uttered in reply."

" Lor, my dear, how very particular you are! " said his wife. " One would really think that instead of being only in a lockup house you was in Newgate, and instead of standing the chances of going to the King's Bench you was afraid of going to the scaffold. But gracious goodness, Emmerson, don't look at me like that. You positively frighten me."

" It's nothing — nothing," said her husband, in a low, hoarse voice, and indeed he felt that his looks were ghastly at the moment, for the sensations which tortured him were the concentrated essence of ten thousand agonies. " Tell

me, I say, all that took place between you and the man who keeps me here."

"Well, I will," said Mrs. Emmerson. "I found him in his counting-house, and told him who I was. His looks immediately became quite glum, and his manner as stiff as possible. I said I wanted to speak to him very particular. I then told him you had exactly eighteen hundred and fifty guineas, which you would give him to let you out; if not, you meant to become bankrupt at once and give the money up to all your creditors, so that there wouldn't be two shillings in the pound."

"And what did he say then? How did he look?" demanded Emmerson, eagerly. "Did it seem to touch him? I am sure he must have unbent a little. Tell me, did he not unbend?" and the wretched man, in his soul's writhings, was thus straining madly to catch at the slightest straw of hope in his sinking desperation.

"No, I can't say that he did," replied his wife, who, entertaining not the least affection for her husband, did not think it necessary to invent a consolation which existed not.

"Ah! he did not unbend, then? But did he seem to believe you?"

"It's difficult to say, because he looked so cold and stiff."

"Well, then, what on earth did he say?"

"He appeared to consider for about a minute; then he opened a great book, turned to the letter E, ran his finger down a column, and stopping at a particular place, said that you owed him three thousand four hundred guineas, besides the expenses, and that before he gave any decision he must consult a friend."

"Ah! a friend," muttered Emmerson, between his set teeth, as his thoughts fixed themselves on Varian, "a friend perhaps to him, but a bitter, unrelenting foe to me!" Then again turning to his wife, he said, aloud, "Well, what next?"

"Nothing more, only that he would let you know in the course of the day, and then he opened the door for me to go out. So as I was coming along, I thought to myself that all this was a judgment on you for having let yourself be made a fool of by the West End countesses, and spending your money on such-like great ladies, who are no better than they should be, for it's no secret that the Earl of Curzon's

proctor is going to bring an action against you and Lord Sackville for crim. con."

"Enough of all that!" interrupted Emmerson, sharply. "If I have had my faults, you have had yours — I mean, in the shape of extravagances."

"Ah! but it is much worse," rejoined his wife, "to go gallivanting about with loose characters, by which means you bring your family into troubles and bothers of all kind."

"Enough, I say!" ejaculated Emmerson, flying into a passion. "And now leave me. I have letters to write. Come back in the evening, if you choose."

"Well, well, perhaps I may," answered his wife, and she soon afterward took her departure, little thinking in what a dreadful state of mind she left her husband, and not being likely to care very much even if she had really known it.

Again did Emmerson pace to and fro in that apartment, which under any circumstances would have been dull and gloomy to a degree, but which now seemed of a dulness and gloom beyond all possibility of description. Heavens! what tortures did that man's brain experience as thus, like a chafing lion in its cage, he turned and turned in that narrow space. Oh, and there is something dreadful, dreadful, in turning thus often and often, for it shows that the mind is filled with a restlessness that is in itself an excruciation.

He looked at his watch. It was now one o'clock. An hour passed; never, never had an hour dragged itself along with such leaden footsteps. Another hour wound its slow length along with a more wearying tardiness still, and yet no one came. Ah! was it a mere excuse of the creditor to get rid of the importunity of his debtor's wife? Emmerson began to fear so. But still he clung to hope. Good God! how could he do otherwise? For the pitch of desperation was passed, and because this very agony of agonies was transcended did it become necessary to fall back upon hope again to save the brain from bursting or from going mad.

It was past three o'clock, and the front door bell rang. There had been many rings during the last two hours, and on each occasion was Emmerson's suspense excited to the utmost degree. Now again, therefore, did he experience the same thrilling, throbbing, rending, excruciating agony,

for everything at present appeared to him a matter of life or death.

Footsteps ascended the stairs; then a key turned in the lock of his door. It was opened, and a visitor entered.

"Varian!" said Emmerson, his heart sinking within him as he encountered the look of his ex-clerk. Then staggering to his seat, he all in a moment felt the necessity of becoming civil, nay, even servile, cringing, and grovelling to that man whom he knew to be the arbiter of his destiny.

It was difficult to gather from Varian's look the mood in which he was toward his imprisoned master. The young man's countenance was fixed and almost passionless; it might have augured a relenting sorrow for Emmerson's fallen condition, or it might equally as well have betokened a cold implacability. All this the miserable captive saw at a glance, and he caught greedily at the ray of hope which pointed to the former. Yet it was hoping in desperation's despite, for deep and dark was the misgiving which at the same time struck to Emmerson's soul.

"I come, sir," said Varian, in a voice the accents of which were as dubious as his looks, leaving nothing of his humour or intent to be gathered from them, "I come, sir, from your detaining creditor, who, as I told you on the night of your arrest, left the matter entirely in my hand."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Varian, I know what you said, I recollect it full well," interrupted Emmerson, quivering with nervous excitement. "Well, and you have recommended him to be merciful? You — you — "

"Be pleased, sir, to listen to me," said Varian. "I have come to deliver myself of a message, and likewise to address you in a few words relative to some little matters concerning which I think you ought to be enlightened."

"Yes, but the message from the creditor, the message, the message?" repeated Emmerson, absolutely pitiable in his unmanned nervousness and the abject impatience of his suspense.

"Permit me to preface what I am about to say on the creditor's behalf with a few observations on my own account," and thus speaking, Theodore Varian seated himself in a chair with the cool deliberation of one who is not only resolved to perform a particular part, but also to take his own time in doing it.

Emmerson resigned himself to a prolonged interval of the cruellest suspense, but so desperate was his position, that he feared to anger the young man by any further demonstration of impatience.

"In the first place, Mr. Emmerson," resumed Theodore Varian, in that cold, measured voice and deliberate manner which was the same as heaping torture upon torture, agony upon agony, in respect to the miserable wretch who wished only to hear one word, yes or no, so that it might be decisive of his fate, and if of the very worst, at least put him out of suspense, "Mr. Emmerson," said Varian, "in the first place, I wish to enlighten you on a few of those proceedings which since my return into your service I have been conducting against you. It was I who threw in your way those newspapers that contained such flaming accounts of speculations and enterprises which I full well conjectured to be worthless, and in your greediness to augment your gains, as well as to counterbalance your extravagances, you nibbled at the bait. Next, when your vanity led you to stand as a candidate for the aldermanic gown of one of the City wards, I went among those who had promised you their support, and thus was it that although your canvass gave promise of complete success, the result of the poll proved the most mortifying, the most humiliating. At the moment you were vapouring and declaiming about 'our blessed Constitution,' 'our glorious laws,' and 'our admirable social system,' I was darkly and insidiously undermining you amongst all your civic friends. To me, then, did you owe your defeat, and secretly I gloried in your discomfiture. Then, about the same time, you began to observe that many of your most influential City friends began to look coldly upon you. It was I who secretly propagated rumours tending to destroy your character, and consequently to diminish your credit. I managed, though with some little difficulty, to scrape an acquaintance and form an intimacy with a clerk at your banker's — "

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson, with a sudden start, for his guilty conscience instantaneously suggested to him that Theodore had most probably become acquainted with the fact of the bill so near due.

"And from that clerk," continued Varian, without appearing to take the slightest notice of either Emmerson's

ejaculation or of his increased perturbation of manner, "from that clerk I learned the exact state of your account, and I told him enough to induce him to put his employers on their guard toward you. Ah! I knew full well at the time that the bankers wrote you a peremptory letter, desiring that your account should be placed on a more satisfactory footing, and I also knew that you applied to several capitalists for an advance of funds. There also was I secretly at work, and I took good care that the evil rumours I spread concerning your financial position should reach their ears. Hence the mortifying refusals which you received, one after the other, and which struck you blow upon blow, every one of which became duly known to me. Nor was I idle in other ways to do you a mischief. I sought excuses for calling upon those well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally did business with you, and I told them where they might obtain pecuniary accommodation on cheaper terms than at your office, so that even your very business rapidly fell off. Then, day by day, as I beheld the catastrophe coming, and ruin advancing upon you with giant strides, I paid frequent visits to the neighbourhood of Clapham, and circulated reports relative to your embarrassed condition. In the City, too, I stirred up all your tradesmen against you, and secretly advised your creditors to press for the prompt settlement of their claims. How well I succeeded in all these engines of destruction which I brought to bear upon you, you best know; and when at last the crisis came, — ay, and I knew full well when it did come, — I was not blind to the fact that you intended to collect together as much money as possible, wherewith to decamp from the country. But in order to lull you into temporary security, so that the final blow might fall all the more terribly, I did my best to get together as much money as I possibly could for you. Then did I observe the joy which you could scarcely conceal, and you thought yourself secure. I watched you, I dogged your movements. Having already come to a secret understanding with your principal creditor in respect to the course to be adopted, I sent to let him know that the time had come to act, and the sheriff's officer was speedily in attendance. You know the rest, and in your present position may you appreciate the folly, the utter folly, as well as the transcending iniquity, of all your former conduct toward me."

"Yes, yes, I have indeed been dreadfully punished, ay, and I am dreadfully punished now," exclaimed Emmerson. "But you have relented, you are satisfied with your vengeance —"

"Listen," interposed Varian, still in that cold, passionless style which left Emmerson in the suspense of such torturing doubt as to what the young man's ultimate intentions were, "I have a few more words to say, but only a very few. You have just learned from my lips how steadily, continuously, yet determinedly I have pursued my vengeance against you, but you have yet to learn that it was I who gave information to the Earl of Curzon relative to your intrigue with his wife. Yes, and that very amount of five thousand guineas which you despatched to the countess in the brown paper parcel fell into the earl's hand through my intervention. Ah! would you not like to have that money now? Would it not enable you to emancipate yourself from all your present difficulties?"

"But — but — do you not think," asked Emmerson, "is it not possible — in a word, do you — do you mean to prosecute this implacable feeling to the very last? Have you, then, no mercy?"

"Had you any mercy for me?" demanded Varian, his manner now undergoing a slightly perceptible change, and the light of a deeply concentrated hatred gleaming in his eyes.

"But did I not take you back again into my service?" asked Emmerson, trembling all over in the agony of suspense.

"Yes, but through no favour for me," replied Varian at once, with an increased bitterness of tone.

"At all events," said Emmerson, "you have had your revenge. By your own admission, you have ruined me."

"And did you not ruin me? Did you not plunge me into Newgate, and compel me to pass through the ordeal of shame and infamy?" cried Theodore, now rising from his seat, and fixing his looks with unmistakable hatred upon the wretched Emmerson. "What though I obtained a pardon? It was a mere release from the danger of punishment; it could not efface that branding-mark of infamy which you fixed upon me. Besides, did you not seek the ruin of my sister? Did you not endeavour to make me, her

brother, the pander to your infamous designs upon her? Mr. Emmerson, your guilt has been damning, your conduct toward me atrocious and infernal. Can you wonder, then, that I seek the deadliest vengeance? By Heaven! I were a coward, a traitor to the very name of man, did I tamely submit to all the wrongs I have received from you. Yes, I have accomplished your ruin, and I glory in it. And now let me tell you, in conclusion, that your detaining creditor will not take one shilling less than the whole amount, because I have privately assured him that, to my certain knowledge, he will get every farthing if he only holds out. In a word, I have persuaded him that you have thousands in your possession, but that your aim is to cheat your creditors, and to keep as much as you possibly can for yourself."

"But what you have said is false," cried Emmerson, now furious with intense hatred and rage.

"I know it," said Varian, coolly, "but you cannot persuade your creditor to think otherwise than what I have told him."

"We shall see," rejoined Emmerson, doggedly. "Now, then, our interview need last no longer."

"Ah! you think that you will be enabled to escape from the web wherein I have enmeshed you?" cried Varian, "but you are mistaken. In three days more that bill which you discounted at your banker's will fall due, and, when presented for payment, we shall see whether it is a forgery or not."

Gasping for breath, with hideous workings of his countenance, and with trembling limbs, the wretched Emmerson fell back annihilated in his seat, and as at that moment the dirty servant-girl came to lay the cloth for his dinner, Theodore Varian availed himself of the opportunity of the door being unlocked to quit the room. But ere he disappeared, he flung back one last look of the bitterest hate and direst malignity upon the wretched man whom his vengeance was thus consigning to eternal perdition.

Three days afterward the bill came due, and was pronounced to be a forgery. Criminal proceedings were forthwith adopted, and Mr. Emmerson, the once opulent money-broker and member of the Common Council, was transferred to Newgate.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOPES AND INTRIGUES IN THE CONDEMNED CELL

Ten days afterward, the sessions commenced at the Old Bailey, and Emmerson was placed upon his trial. As the fallen man stood in the dock, he presented a piteous spectacle indeed to the view of those assembled. All vital colouring had left his countenance, which was hideous in its ghastliness, and the dread expression of which was heightened by the unnatural fever-light that burned in his wild, staring eyes. Most assuredly he did not then look like a man who was in much of a humour to hold forth on "our blessed Constitution," "our glorious laws," and "our admirable social system." On the contrary, he now found out to his cost that the Constitution, if any there be at all, was the very source whence flowed the barbarous, the atrocious, and the sanguinary laws which, in order to prop up the money interests of a vile social system, awarded the penalty of death to the man who committed a forgery.

Such was the sentence passed upon Emmerson now; and when, after a six hours' trial, during which his counsel had exercised all his eloquence and all his ingenuity to procure an acquittal, the prisoner was found guilty, and the judge from the bench pronounced his awful doom, then did the wretched man suddenly feel as if frenzy was seizing upon his brain, and he flung around him a look in which was expressed the direst anguish that the mortal heart could know.

But, ah! what eye encounters his own, and suddenly rivets his attention? Standing on a bench behind the thickest of the crowd thronging the court stood Theodore Varian. He had not appeared as a witness on the trial, because his evidence was not needed, the case being complete enough without his intervention, but he had been,

all the time, a spectator and a listener in the court, ay, and the most interested of all spectators and all listeners. He had marked every varying expression of Emmerson's countenance, every fluctuating emotion, whether of transitory hope or of utter desperation, that found expression there, and he had gloated over the poignant agonies of that wretched man. Now, too, in that crowning moment, when all the first tremendous influence of the death-dooming judgment had fastened upon the prisoner's soul, did Theodore Varian experience the consummation of his infernal joy on meeting the agonizing, despairing look so wildly flung forth from the dock.

The next moment a hand was laid upon Emmerson's shoulder. He started, he turned mechanically, and, with a wildering confusion in his brain, stepped out of the dock. It was one of the turnkeys of Newgate who had thus beckoned him away, but Emmerson recollected him not. He now seemed to be walking in a dream, a sort of intoxication in which ineffable horrors haunted him like shadowy phantoms whose reality was involved in misty doubt. There was a droning sound in his brain, and a ringing in his ears, his sight appeared to swim, and so strange was the feeling in all his limbs that he could not tell whether or not they were joined on to his body, and whether they moved by his own volition or mechanically of themselves.

In this horrible dreaminess he was led back into Newgate, and there, instead of being taken to the ward in which he had hitherto been in company with others, he was now consigned to a cell in another part of the prison. Chains were put upon him, chains that were fastened to his ankles and around his waist, and then he was left alone. Alone! — no, not alone; for in the thoughts and recollections that came gushing back into his brain, dispelling the clouds which had been hanging around, and bringing a horrible clearness with them, oh, in these fearful memories and anguished reflections there was a hideous companionship. For he was now in a condemned cell. He was a doomed man, and his days were numbered.

It may be necessary to remind our readers that up to the period of an accused person's condemnation he is looked upon as innocent, and can therefore dispose of his property according to his pleasure, but the instant a jury's verdict pro-

nounces him guilty of felony, whatever he possesses instantaneously belongs to the Crown. The day before his trial Emmerson had entrusted all his money to his wife. In various ways, such as the expenses of the sponging-house, the cost of his defence, his family's maintenance, and so forth, he had expended about a hundred and fifty guineas, but he had still seventeen hundred guineas left, and it was exactly this sum which he had confided to Mrs. Emmerson. Into her hands did he give it because he had not on earth a friend whom he could trust, no, not one; and though he had sore misgivings when making up his mind thus to place his all in the possession of a frivolous, extravagant, thoughtless woman, who, moreover, had no real affection for him, yet was he compelled to do so. Necessity ruled him, and there was no alternative. At all events, he saw that it was better to incur whatever risk there might be in letting his wife become the guardian of his treasure than to keep it about his person, only to be taken possession of by the sheriff in the name of the Crown.

When seated in his condemned cell, after the trial, alone, and with the chains upon him, and when, too, his mind began to be filled with that horrible clearness which was now so frightfully dispelling all doubts as to the awful reality of his position, his ideas settled upon that amount of seventeen hundred guineas which he had deposited in his wife's hands. But why did the wretched man suffer his thoughts thus to revert to his gold? Was not every tie that had through life bound him to the attractions of lucre now severed by the doom which left him for death? No, no, ten thousand times no! While there was life there was hope, and Emmerson, still catching at straws in his drowning agonies, buoyed himself up with the hope that his gold might serve as a means to accomplish his escape. It was a large sum, and were not turnkeys bribable? To be sure, and suppose that he began by offering five hundred guineas? If this amount would suffice to purchase his safety, he should yet have twelve hundred left wherewith to begin the world anew in another clime. But even supposing that he had to pay a thousand guineas as the bribe for his escape, still there would be seven hundred left for himself, and how much could be done with such an amount! Or even if he had to give every guinea in order to bribe the greedy turnkeys, would it not

be better to go forth a beggar, ay, even the veriest beggar upon the face of the earth, so long as he should be enabled to save this life from that fearful engine of death, the gibbet?

In such a strain as this did the wretched man reason to himself throughout the remainder of the dreadful day of his trial. As a matter of course, objection after objection suggested itself to the plan which he had in view, but with that readiness of ingenuity which desperation itself engenders, he disposed of every obstacle which seemed to menace the successful carrying out of his project. Thus did he beguile his imagination into a dream of hope which was not only solacing, but which also became full of confidence, and he lay down to rest in a mood far less miserable than thousands out-of-doors, when thinking of the man who had that day been sentenced to death, could possibly imagine him to be.

On the following morning, when the turnkey visited the cell, Emmerson thought it prudent not to delay broaching the subject that was uppermost in his mind. He accordingly made some pleasant remark by way of opening a conversation, but when he received a short and almost brutal answer, and then observed that the turnkey's countenance was very far from wearing an encouraging expression, his heart suddenly sank within him, and the words he would have uttered initiatory of the cherished plan died upon his lips.

"Now, then, sir, if you choose to be shaved," said the turnkey, "the barber is going his round, and he shall come to you."

Emmerson was about to answer in the negative; for why should he, a doomed man, and with spirits so suddenly damped into utter hopelessness, trouble himself any more in this life about his personal appearance? But just at the very instant that this negative response was about to fall from his tongue, it suddenly struck him that perhaps the barber might appear more complaisant and wear a more hopeful countenance than the turnkey. He accordingly said, "Yes," and in a few minutes the barber was introduced.

When Emmerson found himself alone with this individual, in the condemned cell where they were left together by the turnkey, he surveyed him not merely with attention, but with an earnest scrutiny. He saw, then, before him a man of about six or seven and twenty, thin, pale, and with the

marks of dissipation on his features. There was also a certain sinister expression on that countenance, which seemed actually encouraging to the purpose Emmerson had in view. As for the barber himself, he of course saw that he was the object of this survey, but did not appear to take any special notice of it, doubtless fancying that it might arise from the morbid mood or disturbed humour of a wretched being condemned to death.

"So you are the prison barber?" said Emmerson, with his eyes still riveted on the man.

"I am, sir, just for the present," was the reply, "the regular one being ill."

"Ah! then you are not the regular one?" said Emmerson, inquiringly. "How long have you acted in this capacity within these walls?"

"About six weeks," was the man's answer, as he prepared his shaving-tackle.

"And are you likely to continue visiting the prison much longer?"

"Well, I should say I am, sir, for the regular barber don't seem to be getting well."

"In that case, then, you must come and shave me," said Emmerson, "every morning until —"

And he stopped suddenly short, as a man pauses in horror upon the brink of a precipice which he suddenly reaches.

"I shall be very happy, sir," was the barber's observation, "and I am sure I am very sorry to see a gentleman of your standing in such —"

"Enough," said Emmerson, not sternly, but convulsively with horror. "What is your name?" he demanded, quickly.

"Richard Melmoth — Dick, they call me, sir. But I ain't a master barber on my own account. I live with Mr. Coffin, who —"

And then he also stopped short in sudden confusion, for he instantaneously perceived that he had just mentioned a name which might be already too well known to the doomed man.

"Coffin!" echoed the latter, with another strong shudder convulsing him from head to foot as he sat in his chair, so that the very chains clanked upon his legs with the powerful writhing of his limbs. "Is not he the — the — you know what I mean?"

"Well, he is, sir," responded Dick Melmoth, "but I am sure I beg pardon for having hinted at anything unpleasant."

"No matter, no matter, my good fellow," said Emmerson, with the quickness of nervous excitement. "Your master, Coffin — you said he was your master, I think?"

"Yes, sir, Dan'el Coffin is my master, and a tidy sort of a person he is, notwithstanding his name isn't a very good one."

"Ah! no matter the name," interrupted Emmerson, catching greedily at what he saw encouraging in Dick Melmoth's remark. "You say that your master, Daniel Coffin, is a good kind of a man? Well, and if I mistake not, you also are a good kind of a person. You would rather do a fellow creature a service than an injury? Yes, yes, I know you would — I read it in your countenance. Especially," added Emmerson, his voice sinking to a low whisper and his look assuming an expression of deep and excited meaning, "if you were to be well paid for any such service rendered?"

Dick Melmoth now regarded the doomed man with mingled astonishment and mistrust, for it struck him that the awful sense of his position might have touched his brain. But perceiving nought indicative of mental alienation in his look, Melmoth assumed a cunning air, and whispered, "There's nothing that Dan'el Coffin would not do for money."

"Tell him, then, tell him," said Emmerson, with feverish eagerness, "that I will give him five hundred guineas, yes, five hundred good golden guineas if he will assist me to escape from this dreadful place."

"Ah! have you really that hope, then?" said Dick Melmoth.

"Hope! Yes, to be sure I have hope," returned Emmerson, sharply. "It is impossible I can die so soon. No, no, it is impossible. Consider, five hundred guineas, and if that is not enough — But it is a large sum, a very large sum, and a great deal can be done with it. Tell Mr. Coffin all that I say."

"Well, sir, I will, and to-morrow morning when I come in I will let you know what his answer is. But you had better let me shave you now as soon as possible, for the turnkey will be coming back in a minute to let me out of the

cell, and he will think it odd if I have not even begun to put the brush to your face."

Emmerson accordingly submitted himself to the process of shaving, and by the time it was over, the turnkey made his appearance to let the barber out.

As hour after hour now passed away, Emmerson continued to yield himself up to the wildest hopes, and yet his exterior was composed and tranquil as he sat in the solitude of his cell giving way to these sanguine visions. He resembled the teriaki, or Oriental opium-eater, who without moving from his seat, and with an unruffled and unvarying equanimity of countenance, launches himself on the sunny ocean of his excited imaginings, visits in fancy the most delicious climates of the world, revels in every joy, partakes in every pleasure, and not merely forgets every source of earthly uneasiness, but conjures up ten thousand causes of Elysian bliss.

In a similarly dreamy state did Emmerson while away the time. His character seemed to be altogether changed by his misfortunes. Once eminently practical in all his pursuits, he was now a mere visionary; but then, it was so necessary now to cheat the mind of its sources of terror, lull the soul into confidence, and conjure up the delusions of hope to displace the dark realities of despair.

The chaplain visited the cell, and then Emmerson, awakening from his dream, listened attentively to all that the reverend gentleman had to say. For Emmerson had always been a hypocrite with regard to religion, and it suited him to be more so now, so that he might appear to have renounced every thought for this life and thus lull asleep all suspicion respecting his hope of escape. The chaplain passed an hour with him, and then withdrew in the belief that the condemned man was very penitent and in a most admirable state of mind, considering all things. Therefore, in consequence of the reverend gentleman's report, it was deemed totally unnecessary to place anybody in the condemned cell to keep watch upon Emmerson. Indeed, such was not the custom at the time of which we are writing, save in those cases where there was positive ground for apprehending an attempt at suicide.

The day was slipping away, and Emmerson began to wonder that his wife and daughter had not been to see him.

Previous to the trial he had enjoined them not to be in the court, and the result was borne to them by the attorney who had conducted his defence. That they had not visited him during the first few hours which succeeded the terrible sentence was not surprising, for little as was the affection subsisting between the husband and wife, yet, at all events, the feelings of the daughter toward the father were a little more tender, and it might be well supposed that Miss Emmerson was fearfully shocked at her sire's awful position. But why, after having had the benefit of an entire night to compose their minds somewhat, his wife and daughter should not visit him during the day that was now passing, he could not conjecture. He began to be alarmed lest they meant to leave him unsolaced to meet his doom, while they squandered away the money entrusted to their keeping. But while he was beginning to give way to these apprehensions, the door of the cell was opened, and two ladies, dressed in deep mourning of a very handsome description, were ushered in. Their veils were down, and for a moment Emmerson was in doubt whether his suspicion as to who they were was correct or not. But all doubt was speedily dissipated when they raised their veils and threw themselves into his arms, sobbing and crying in a manner which was afterward represented in the newspapers as " most agonizing."

But the moment the turnkey had withdrawn, Emmerson disengaged himself from the embrace of his wife and daughter, and, glancing sternly from one to the other, he said, " What is the meaning of this? "

" Oh, my dear, dear husband," sobbed Mrs. Emmerson, " how can you ask us such a question? Arabella and me would have been here earlier to-day, but we could not get our mourning sent home before. I gave orders for it the instant I heard the dreadful news yesterday, and the milliner sat up all night to make it. We thought it was but decent and proper to wait till it was ready before we came to see you."

" Nonsense, ridiculous! " ejaculated Emmerson, actually forgetting for the moment all the horrors of his position in the rage that he felt at the conduct of his wife and daughter in thus visiting him in the pomp of new mourning. " Do you know that this proceeding on your part has been dicta-

ted by a heartless vanity, and not by a genuine grief? Ah! there is gaiety even in your very mourning, there is finery in these weeds which you have assumed. You treat me as if I were already dead — "

Here Arabella threw herself with no affected outburst of grief into her father's arms, and besought him to pardon her if she had in any way done wrong, but, amidst rending sobs, she gaspingly declared that whatever she had done was at her mother's suggestion.

" Well, we will say no more about it," said Emmerson, disengaging himself from his daughter's embrace, for he was a man who disliked all huggings and kissings from those who were nearest and ought to have been dearest to him. " You have got that money safe? " he asked, turning abruptly toward his wife.

" Yes, to be sure, all except what we have laid out," and she glanced down at her mourning garb and then at that of her daughter.

" Now, understand me," said Emmerson, speaking in a low but decisive tone and with a look profoundly serious. " All hope has not abandoned me; indeed, I am confident of being enabled to escape. Now don't be foolish, Arabella, we shall be overheard," he said, suddenly turning toward his daughter, who gave vent to a paroxysm of unfeigned joy at the tidings which had just met her ears. " But all depends," he continued, again speaking to his wife, " upon your keeping that money safe until the moment it is wanted to pay those who will assist in my escape."

" Depend upon it," answered Mrs. Emmerson, " that it is as safe with me as if in the Bank of England."

We need not dwell any longer upon this interview, which lasted but little more than half an hour, for so soon as Emmerson had assured himself that the money was really safe in his wife's keeping, he rather wished that she and Arabella would take their departure, so that he might once more give way to that opiate lull in which he had during the early part of the day steeped his senses.

On the following morning Emmerson awaited Dick Melmoth's arrival with the most acute suspense. In due course the turnkey made his appearance to inquire if Emmerson would have the barber, and with such greedy haste did the condemned man reply in the affirmative, that the prison

functionary, evidently struck by his manner, could not help eying him suspiciously for a moment.

"Ah! it is such a relief," immediately exclaimed Emmerson, recovering his presence of mind, "to have some one to talk to, if only for a few minutes."

This remark at once satisfied the turnkey, who perhaps would even have been satisfied without it, for he had been long enough employed within those prison walls to know that condemned men were but too likely to say and do strange things.

Once more alone with Dick Melmoth, Emmerson immediately saw by his manner that the proposal had been entertained, and his heart dilated within him.

"Well, what does your master say? Has he agreed? Will he accept?"

"He will do it," answered Dick Melmoth, "but not under a thousand."

"A thousand!" ejaculated Emmerson. "That is enormous."

"Ay, and Coffin says that it is a precious risk to run," replied Dick. "Remember it's no joke to help a man out of such a hobble as this, and if so be he was caught — "

"But he will undertake it?" asked Emmerson, nervously.

"He will," rejoined Dick Melmoth. "But what earnest can you give him that the money will be forthcoming when the work is done?"

"I have the money — "

"You! — here?" ejaculated Melmoth. "Why, if the sheriff knew it, he would take every farthing away from you in a jiffy."

"I do not mean here," returned Emmerson. "My wife has got the money — or can get it. A friend will let her have it when the time comes — "

"Ah! but suppose he shouldn't?" said Melmoth.

"But I know that he will," returned Emmerson, positively.

"But Mr. Coffin don't know it, you see, and he won't move a peg till he sees that there's no mistake about the blunt."

"Well, then," said Emmerson, perceiving that it was necessary to be explicit, "my wife has got the money already,

and if you like, your master, Mr. Coffin, can go and see it at her lodgings."

"Well and good," observed Dick Melmoth. "This looks like business. Where is the lady's lodging?"

"In Fetter Lane," and Emmerson named the number of the house where his wife and daughter were dwelling. "They will visit me in the course of the day. I will tell them that a person may probably call upon them this evening in order to see that they really possess the sum we have named. Will that arrangement do?"

"Yes, perfectly," replied Melmoth. "Mr. Coffin has left the business to me to manage, because he himself can't very well come and see you on account of its not being usual for him to visit persons in your situation."

"I understand you," said Emmerson, with a ghastly look, for he knew that the allusion was meant to Coffin in his capacity of public executioner. "But the plan of my escape, the means, the arrangements —"

"I will tell you more to-morrow morning," interrupted Dick Melmoth. "We must not converse too long now."

He then proceeded to exercise his tonsorial functions upon Mr. Emmerson, and by the time he had done, the turnkey came back to give him egress from the cell. Emmerson was now once more alone, and he proceeded to reflect upon all that had just taken place. But his reverie was presently interrupted by the entrance of the chaplain, and again did the condemned man conduct himself in a way which induced the reverend gentleman to think most favourably of his state of mind.

Soon after midday Mrs. and Miss Emmerson again made their appearance, and Emmerson, after explaining to them the nature of the visit they were to expect in the evening, addressed his wife in the ensuing terms:

"Now, remember, you will show the person that calls, whoever he may be, one thousand guineas and no more. If he asks whether you possess more, you will give an emphatic reply in the negative. And be careful that he sees the money only, and touches it not, for I am dealing with unscrupulous characters, — necessarily so in the position wherein I am placed. I need not tell you that it is my life which has to be saved, my life which to a certain extent will be in your hands on this occasion."

Mrs. Emmerson promised faithful compliance with her husband's instructions, and Arabella was so much affected she went into hysterics. Mr. Emmerson hated "a scene," especially as he wished to avoid everything tending to dispirit himself, and he therefore was well pleased when his wife and daughter took their departure. He then remained once more alone to pursue his reflections and abandon himself to that condition of dreamy hopefulness which, as we before stated, had the effect of an opiate to lull him into tranquillity and security.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PRETENDED FRIEND

Theodore Varian had not in the meantime experienced any diminution of that fearful interest which he felt in the fate of his victim, an interest of no compassionating kind, but the aim of which was to ensure the dread catastrophe beyond the intervention of anything to prevent it. He had therefore, on the preceding day and on that of which we are now writing, lurked about the exterior of Newgate, watching whether any of Emmerson's former friends came to visit the prison, for it struck him that the unhappy man might endeavour to obtain the interest of some toward procuring a pardon. Having been a prisoner there himself, Theodore was acquainted with the turnkeys, and by means of a little bribery and a little treating at the adjacent public-house, he ascertained the seeming condition of the man's mind. That is to say, he was told that Emmerson bore himself tranquilly and with apparent resignation, and that no persons from out-of-doors save his wife and daughter had been admitted to see him.

Theodore Varian knew all the ins and outs of Emmerson's character so well as to be fully aware that anything like resignation on his part could be merely a hypocritical assumption, and he therefore came to the conclusion that the doomed man had yet some hope on which he relied, or some project which he was working out. But Varian was determined that hope and project alike should fail, whatever they might be, for in the implacability of his vengeance he resolved to hunt his mortal enemy to the scaffold, and only rest when he beheld him hanging lifeless there.

While pondering upon the position of affairs, it struck Theodore that he would call upon the barber who usually

attended in the prison, ascertain if he had performed his functions upon Emmerson, and if so, whether he also believed him to be in a resigned and tranquil condition. But on proceeding to the barber's house in the Old Bailey, Theodore learned that the object of his inquiry had been ill for some time, and that he had temporarily delegated his monopoly of beards within Newgate walls to one Richard Melmoth belonging to another barber's shop, in Fleet Lane. Thither did Varian accordingly repair, and on observing the name of Coffin over the door, he at once knew that this was the abode of the public executioner.

It was in the afternoon when Theodore entered the Hangman's shop, and, taking off his hat, he bade the young man who was in attendance proceed to cut his hair. This was none other than Dick Melmoth himself, who, placing a chair for his customer, commenced the operation forthwith.

"So they have found the City bill-broker guilty of the forgery," said Varian, as if in a casual manner.

"Yes," answered Dick Melmoth. "I saw him this morning."

"Did you, indeed?" cried Theodore, suddenly showing an interest in the topic of conversation.

"To be sure, and yesterday morning also," replied Melmoth. "The fact is, I attend in there to shave the prisoners, the regular barber being ill."

"And how does Emmerson bear himself?" asked Theodore.

"Well, pretty comfortably, all things considering," answered Melmoth.

"Do you mean to say that he has any hope of a reprieve?"

"Lor' bless you, sir, everybody has a hope till the last, and I don't think Mr. Emmerson is different from the rest."

There was now a brief pause, during which Theodore Varian reflected profoundly.

"Is he communicative at all with you?" he at length asked.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded Dick Melmoth.

"I mean," returned Theodore, looking up in a significant manner toward Melmoth's countenance, "that if you would do something for me, I will pay you handsomely."

"Well, that's English, at all events," said Melmoth. "But

what do you want me to do, and what do you mean by handsome payment? "

" Can we have a little conversation together without fear of interruption? " asked Theodore. " This shop is very public, and we may be overheard."

" Well, then," said a growling, savage kind of voice, " step in here, and we will talk the matter over."

Theodore started, even to the risk of having the scissors thrust into his eyes, as that voice, coming from behind, struck his ear, and on looking around, he beheld a most repulsive individual, standing on the threshold of the door opening into the little parlour behind the shop, for the Hangman had been attentively listening all the while to the preceding colloquy between Dick Melmoth and the customer.

Accordingly, a finishing stroke being given to the hair-clipping operation, Theodore passed into the back room, where the Hangman bade him sit down, saying, " I see you have a little business in hand, and we will talk it over quietly. I suppose you know who I am, and if not, I'll act as my own master of the ceremonies and introduce myself as Mr. Dan'el Coffin. This chap here is my assistant," he added, pointing to Melmoth, " and so we can talk before him. Come, shut the door, Dick, and sit down along with us."

" You doubtless overheard what I was saying to your assistant," observed Varian, conquering the mingled repugnance and terror which he for a moment felt on finding himself in the company of that dreadful man, who, as he had learned from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was a principal actor in the memorable scenes at the hut near Shooter's Hill.

" To be sure," exclaimed the Hangman. " The moment I heard you beginning to talk serious to Dick Melmoth here, I began to listen very attentive indeed. It's my way, because I never let a chance escape."

" Well, well, Mr. Coffin," said Theodore, " we have come together, and need not discuss how it has been brought about. The fact is, I am a very dear and intimate friend of Mr. Emmerson — "

" Ah! then you came to my shop just now with an intention," interrupted the Hangman, " and not in a promiscuous manner? "

" No, not in an accidental manner," rejoined Varian. " I learned from the regular prison barber that you, or, rather, your man here, had got the custom of the place, and so I came to see you. The fact is, as I have just now said, I am an intimate friend of Emmerson's, but I dare not openly display the deep interest I feel in him. You will excuse me for declining to enter into particulars? Suffice it to say that whatever I do in this matter is entirely of a private nature. I must not be seen in it, I must not be known in it. Emmerson himself must not even be suffered to learn that any effort at all is being made in his behalf — at least, not until its result be known, for it were useless to buoy him up with hope unless it is certain to be fulfilled."

" Well, then, what do you propose, and how can we help you in any way? " demanded the Hangman, who did not exactly see what Theodore was driving at, or appeared to be driving at.

" Your assistant here, Mr. Coffin, has access to Mr. Emmerson," continued Theodore. " Could he not glean from the unhappy man whether, if the means of escape were put within his reach, he would avail himself of them? "

" Yes, this can be done fast enough," said the Hangman, exchanging a rapid glance of significancy with Dick Melmoth, but not so rapid as to escape Theodore's observation. " Well, then, suppose what you have suggested is done, what next? "

" Having first ascertained whether Emmerson would avail himself of the means of escape if placed within his power," continued Theodore, " it would follow, as a matter of course, to see whether such means could by any possibility be afforded."

" Well, and you would enter into it all, and you would pay for it? " asked the Hangman, with another quick glance toward Dick Melmoth.

" If I were not prepared to do so, I should not be here this moment," said Theodore. " As for my readiness to be the secret mover in any stratagem that may ensure my unfortunate friend's escape from an ignominious death, I have sought you out for the purpose, and as for my means of remunerating you, behold! " and with these words Theodore displayed a number of bank-notes, which he took from a pocketbook, and for the possession of which he was indebted

to the bounty of his kind benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Come, all this is businesslike enough," said the Hangman. "But you say you don't wish to appear in the matter?"

"No; my avocations, my station in life, my connections, everything, prevent me from taking any overt part in this proceeding. Indeed, I would not have it mentioned until the very last to Emmerson himself that I am engaged in whatsoever plan may be set on foot for his deliverance. I shall not even tell you my name, or who I am, nor aught concerning me; and if any undue curiosity be manifested with a view to discover who I am, I shall at once abandon the affair and have nothing more to do with it."

Wary, cunning, and astute as the reader knows the Hangman to be, he was gradually thrown off his guard by this language so specious, so plausible. Indeed, it appeared natural enough that an influential person, of good standing in society, should keep himself completely in the background while setting afoot a project of the kind hinted at, and that Varian was a young gentleman of the utmost respectability, both the Hangman and Dick Melmoth readily believed from his personal appearance. Moreover, the sight of the bank-notes had produced a marvellous effect upon Mr. Coffin's credulity, touching his weakest point and working on his most delicate susceptibility. He accordingly resolved, after exchanging another significant look with Dick Melmoth, to give the present business a shape and substantiality at once by confiding to Theodore everything that was already in contemplation.

"Well, sir, I see that you are one of the right sort," he accordingly began, "and so we can soon come to an understanding with each other. In the first place, you want to know whether your unfortunate friend, Mr. Emmerson, would avail himself of the means of escape if they were placed in his way? This is what you want to know, and I can give you the information at once, without making you wait a single hour, much less a whole day, to acquire it. As for what the information is worth, I must leave that to your generosity."

"Fifty guineas by way of a commencement," said Theodore, inwardly rejoicing at the success of the tact he had

displayed in thus drawing out the Hangman, for he saw that he was about to learn something of real importance.

"Thank'ee, sir," said Daniel Coffin, as he took up the bank-notes which Theodore flung across the table. "Now, then, I can tell you," he proceeded, with a knowing look upon his hangdog countenance, "that not only is Mr. Emmerson ready to avail himself of any means of escape which may be presented to him, but he and my man Dick Melmoth here have already had a little talk on the subject."

"Ah! this is indeed good news," exclaimed Theodore, with a well-assumed look of the most genuine joy. "Poor Emmerson! he has been a dear and valued friend to me, and I would make many, many sacrifices to save him from so dreadful a death. Tell me, tell me, my good friends," he continued, with every appearance of the most heartfelt feeling, "whether there be really a chance, a hope, even the slightest prospect, of accomplishing his rescue?"

"Where there's a will there's a way," answered Coffin, "and although the walls of Newgate are very thick and very high, the bars very massive, the watch very vigilant, and the chains on one's legs uncommon awkward, yet all these obstacles may be got over when Dan'el Coffin chooses to set his wits to work."

"Ah! now you encourage the most sanguine hope within me," cried Theodore, seizing the Hangman's hand and pressing it with an appearance of the most genuine fervour. "Tell me what your plans are, explain to me what is already done, and whatever reward has been already promised you, I will double it. Yes," added Theodore, with strong emphasis, "I will double it, no matter how large the amount."

The Hangman threw upon Dick Melmoth a look of gloating satisfaction at this magnificent promise, and reverting his eyes toward Varian, he said, "You are very liberal, sir, very generous indeed, but take care you don't talk rather too fast when you speak about doubling the reward."

"I tell you that what I said was deliberately uttered," rejoined Theodore, "and was no vain, idle boast. Come, tell me at once what is the amount of the reward promised you?"

"A thousand guineas," returned the Hangman, intently

watching Varian's countenance, so as to ascertain the nature of the impression made by this announcement.

"A thousand guineas! It is a large sum," said Theodore, slowly, and apparently in a musing mood, "but still I shall not fly from my word. How and when is this money to be paid? For I may as well fulfil my promise at the same time."

"Well, you are indeed an out-and-out friend to Mr. Emmerson," observed the Hangman, thinking it necessary to flatter his generous visitor with a compliment. "To tell you the truth, then, Mrs. Emmerson is going to convince us to-night that the money is ready. She has got it, or will have it, at her lodgings, so I shall just toddle down to Fetter Lane between nine and ten to-night to convince myself that the cash is there, and if you like, sir, to make an appointment with me at about the same time, anywhere you choose, you might take the opportunity of proving that your money will be forthcoming also. Besides, as I mean to ask Mrs. Emmerson for a few hundreds on account, perhaps you would not mind — "

"Certainly not. I understand you well," exclaimed Varian, with so much apparent frankness and cordial willingness of manner that never in all his life had Daniel Coffin been so completely thrown off his guard. "I will call upon you here at ten o'clock to-night, and bring you a few hundreds on account. But observe, not a single syllable to any one," he added, rising from his seat as he spoke.

"Mum's the word, sir," rejoined Daniel Coffin. "I always keep secrets as close as wax."

Theodore Varian then took his departure, leaving the Hangman and Dick Melmoth to chuckle over the lucrative job they appeared to have in hand, and congratulate themselves on the prospect of clearing a couple of thousand guineas in a very short space of time.

The reader could not have experienced any difficulty in penetrating Varian's object throughout the preceding interview with Coffin and his assistant. From the moment that the conversation in the shop first took a turn that promised to become interesting and confidential, Varian's aim was to ascertain whether Emmerson was buoyed up with any particular hope, and if so, what its nature might be. By pretending to be the doomed man's friend, it not only

seemed natural enough that he should be taking an interest in his predicament, but it likewise was the best method of inviting any confidential communication. In all this, then, had Theodore fully succeeded, and it now only remained for him to frustrate the plan and annihilate the hope.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE RESULT

An almost sleepless night did Emmerson pass, for he was now tortured with a thousand anxieties relative to the success of the schemes that were in progress for his deliverance from the scaffold. Though hope was certainly uppermost in his mind, yet he could not any longer lull himself into that dreaminess which had heretofore soothed him for so many hours at a time. No, for his imagination suggested many, many sources of alarm and uneasiness that agitated in his mind, along with the hope which, though maintaining the ascendency, was not powerful enough to extinguish every militating feeling altogether. What if any accident should happen to the money? Everything depended upon the safety of that gold which was to prove the key of his deliverance.

He wished that he had asked his wife where she kept it, whether in a cupboard or in a trunk, and whether she carried the key in her pocket when she went out. Then he feared lest Daniel Coffin should strive to possess himself of the money without the intention of doing his work for it. Next he asked himself, over and over again, how the escape was to be effected, supposing that all was right with the money, and that Coffin proved faithful to his agreement. For when Emmerson thought of the tremendous massive walls, which enclosed him, as it were, in a living tomb, the other walls equally impregnable that lay between his own cell and the open street, the enormous bars that grated the windows, the numbers of persons always about during the day in every part of the prison, and the careful watch which he knew full well was kept by night, — when, we say, he thought of all these things, he beheld so many insuperable barriers

between himself and freedom that he almost grew wild with horror and affright. But the next moment the whisperings of hope would remind him that men had escaped from Newgate on various occasions, and however desperate and daring their exploits might have been, he was prepared to act as desperately and daringly in his own behalf. Besides, who could tell what schemes Daniel Coffin might suggest, what opportunities he might find for smoothing down difficulties, and what bold conception he might initiate so as to lead to the fullest success?

Such is a brief outline of the conflicting thoughts which agitated in Emmerson's brain throughout the greater portion of the night, and made him toss and heave and roll and writhe and convulse, and clasp his hands, and press them to his throbbing brows, in fact, that whirled him through every possible phase of the heart's most potent feelings as he lay on the hard pallet in his gloomy cell. For a few brief intervals an uneasy slumber crept upon him, but on each occasion he woke up with a sudden start, pursued even into wakefulness by some horrible phantom that had haunted his temporary sleep. Or he would perhaps find himself sitting up in the bed, trembling all over with a strong agony, bathed in a profuse perspiration, cold and clammy as that of death, with the feeling, too, that his hair was standing right out, as it were, from his head. In this manner, between conflicting thoughts and brief intervals of fevered slumber, did Emmerson pass the livelong night.

Although it was now the beginning of the month of June, yet dull and misty broke the morning into the condemned cell, penetrating thither, indeed, with a hesitating, struggling uncertainty, much later than it had dawned upon the world without, for the windows of the cell were small, darkened with the massive bars, and not looking into one of the yards, but upon an obscure corridor, into which the light had to struggle first ere it penetrated more feebly still into the dungeon. The weather was exceedingly cold, too, for the time of year, and Emmerson shivered from head to foot as he rose from the pallet. His teeth chattered, he was nervous and uneasy, and he felt that if the slightest circumstance should occur to damp his only hope, his courage, such as it was in its unnatural bracing-up, would give way altogether.

It wanted an hour to the usual time of Dick Melmoth's arrival. An hour — oh, what a long, weary interval of excruciating suspense! If the idler, the debauchee, and the dissipated only knew what a world of feeling may be summed up in a single hour, how much of torturing agony may be condensed into that space, they would learn the importance of time and the value of each of those many, many hours which they waste in worthless, bad, or frivolous pursuits.

At length the well-known tread of the turnkey, accompanied by the clanking sound of the keys along the stone corridor, reached Emmerson's ears. It would be impossible to describe the feeling which now seized upon him, a feeling in which all the most powerful sentiments were strangely, wildly, and terribly blended, — burning hope and chilling dread, a devouring anxiety to receive the first look or word from Melmoth that should relieve him from suspense, and a fearful clinging even to this very suspense, lest certainty itself should become the horror of despair.

The key grated in the lock, the huge bolts were drawn back, and the stout, burly form of the prison functionary appeared on the threshold.

"Will you have the barber this morning, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes, yes, to be sure," was the response given with a nervousness that was rather felt than shown.

"Now, then, Dick," cried the turnkey, and Melmoth advanced along the passage.

The next moment he passed into the cell, and as the door closed behind him, he gave a slight but ominous shake of the head, in mute answer to the devouring, agonizing, beseeching regard which Emmerson fixed upon him.

As if a thunderbolt had stricken the wretched man, he fell back, and tumbled with the helpless weight of a corpse upon the bed which was immediately behind him. Dick Melmoth was frightened, and hastened to raise him, but for an instant did the young man recoil in horror, for never, never in his life had he beheld a countenance so ghastly, so perfectly hideous in its strong expression of awful feeling, as that which now looked up into his own. No, nor did Melmoth believe it possible that the human visage could in a moment become so distorted, so convulsed with horrible workings, or that it could be made so fearfully faithful an

index of the direst tortures that ever harrowed the human heart.

Slowly raising himself to a sitting posture on the side of the bed, Emmerson gazed up at Melmoth and endeavoured to frame some question that rose to his lips, but his tongue refused to give utterance to the words he sought to speak, and he sat vainly gasping, a piteous, wretched, miserable spectacle of abject humanity, with a crushed and broken spirit.

"It's all dicky with money and everything else, unless something should turn out to be better than we suspect," began Melmoth, not giving himself much trouble to break the intelligence in a delicate way.

"What — what do you mean?" asked Emmerson, just able to gasp forth these words.

"Why, I mean that the sheriff sent yesterday afternoon to your wife's lodgings and took all the money," answered Dick. "Sixteen or seventeen hundred guineas, I think I heard it was."

"O God! O God!" groaned Emmerson, in the bitterness of despair, and bowing his head upon his hands while his elbows rested on his knees, he became convulsed with grief.

But all of a sudden it struck him that the interview with the barber must necessarily be short, and that he should at least make the best of it, so as to ascertain his exact position. Recovering therefore some degree of composure, he bade Melmoth tell him everything that had taken place.

"Well, you see, sir," returned Dick, "last night, at a little after nine o'clock, me and Mr. Coffin toddled down to Fetter Lane, and on arriving at the house, were shown up to your lady's apartment. But, lo and behold! there was Mrs. Emmerson and your daughter a-sitting one on one side of the room and one on t'other, both rocking themselves to and fro, and moaning, and crying, and going on at such a rate that me and Mr. Coffin was quite taken aback. We stated our business, and then your good lady told us how the sheriff's officers had been and made a search in consequence of some secret information they had got, and how they took away every farthing except fifty guineas, which, by the sheriff's order, was left for the use of the ladies. So, finding that there was no money forthcoming, and not being a lady's man at all, — I mean, in offering sympathy

and all that kind of thing, — Mr. Coffin took himself home again, I of course going with him."

"But good Heaven!" cried Emmerson, in the wildness of his despair, "who could have given the information? Surely, surely, my mortal enemy, he who has hunted me to the very death, is not persecuting me still?"

"You don't happen to know whether it's likely that any friend is interesting himself in your behalf?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Friend!" repeated Emmerson, with almost maniac bitterness, "friend! Good heavens! do I look like a man who possesses a friend?"

"Well, then, I had better put the question point-blank," said Melmoth. "Do you know a young gentleman, about five and twenty, I should say, tall, nice-looking, slender, very neatly dressed, linen beautifully clean, fine eyes, too, I noticed, and a very good set of teeth — "

"Why, you are describing my mortal enemy, Theodore Varian," almost shrieked forth Emmerson, springing from the bed with a suddenness that made his fetters clank loudly and even hurt his limbs by the motion.

"Ah! then it was a damnable treachery, after all," exclaimed Dick Melmoth, "and Coffin more than suspected it when we found he did not come last night, according to his appointment."

"What on earth do you mean? To what are you alluding?" demanded the wretched man, in the cruelest suspense. "Tell me what has occurred."

"Why, yesterday, in the middle of the day, this young gentleman comes in such a cajoling fashion, gets me into conversation, then gets the upper hand of Dan'el himself, professes so much friendship for you, promises so many liberal things, and, in short, worms himself so completely into our confidence, that Mr. Coffin tells him everything, even to the fact of the money being at your good lady's lodgings —"

"Oh, accursed idiots that you were!" and the words hissed reptile-like between Emmerson's teeth, while his eyes glared with frenzied malignity upon Dick Melmoth, who recoiled from him in horror. "You have ruined me. You have sealed my doom, you and your accursed master. Oh, it is clear as daylight now, — too clear, too clear! Theodore Varian

pursues me still. He is determined to hunt me to the gallows. It is he who gave the information to the sheriff — my God! my God!"

And again the wretched man fell backward upon the hard pallet, with his hands pressed violently against his throbbing brows. There he lay, writhing and convulsing like a stricken snake, giving vent to the most piteous lamentations, mingled with the bitterest complainings and the most fearful curses. In truth, it was an awful spectacle, and if Dick Melmoth's heart was too much steeled against the kind sympathies of human nature to experience any real commiseration for the unhappy man, he was at all events shocked and horrified at the appalling nature of his anguish and despair. The paroxysm of almost mortal agony lasted for several minutes, and then Melmoth ventured to remind the doomed criminal that the turnkey would speedily be coming back.

"Ah! wretch that I am," he exclaimed, springing up once more from the pallet as suddenly as if galvanized, "every ground of hope is slipping away from beneath my feet, even as the drop itself shall glide away from under me when the last tremendous moment comes. But tell me, tell me, is all lost? Do you mean to abandon me to my fate? My God! you cannot have the hearts, you and Mr. Coffin, to do it. Remember, it is through you, your folly, your indiscretion, that I am deprived of the means of paying you."

"Don't you think that it's possible for you to get a thousand guineas anywhere else?" asked Dick Melmoth.

"No, nor a thousand pence," cried Emmerson, wringing his hands in despair, while his distorted features, ashy lips, gleaming eyes, and corrugating brows rendered his countenance absolutely awful; for it seemed as if there were not a nerve, nor a tendon, nor a fibre in that man's frame that did not vibrate to the touch of the heart's strong agony, not a pulse in his whole body that did not beat in sympathy with the maddening excruciation of his soul, not a vein nor an artery in which the blood did not course with the velocity of lightning and with the torturing sensation as if that blood were molten lead.

"Then you have really no hope?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Hope! yes, in you and your master, for you cannot abandon me now."

"But the risk that is to be run, who is to pay us for that?"

"Risk!" cried Emmerson. "But do I not run a risk also?"

"Yes, but you are sentenced to be hanged," rejoined Melmoth, with more truth than delicacy, "while me and Coffin are not."

Emmerson was petrified all in a moment by this answer. The workings of his countenance suddenly ceased, its ghastliness of expression becoming fixed and stereotyped on his features, but without movability, while he gazed upon Dick Melmoth in mingled horror and consternation.

In the middle of this strange scene the approaching steps of the gaol functionary, and the clanking of his keys along the stone corridor without, met the ears of Emmerson and Melmoth.

"Heavens, he comes!" suddenly whispered the former, "and nothing is decided."

"No, there is nothing to decide now," replied Dick. "Come, sit down, make haste, and let me shave you."

"No, no, not for worlds could I settle myself to anything!" exclaimed Emmerson, now seized with another paroxysm of wild, excruciating anguish, and again did he toss himself upon the bed, where he lay writhing fearfully as the turnkey entered the cell.

"He's not in a state of mind to be shaved this morning," said Dick Melmoth, in a whisper to that functionary. "The fit took him the moment after you locked us in together, and it's lasted ever since. I don't think he's in his right mind."

"Well, then, we must send the doctor to him," remarked the turnkey, coolly.

Thereupon Dick Melmoth quitted the condemned cell, and shortly afterward, when Emmerson regained some degree of composure, he found the prison chaplain and surgeon by his bedside.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST HOPE

The miserable man gazed for some time upon the two gentlemen without recognizing them, although he had seen them both several times since his incarceration in Newgate, but as the paroxysm of his ineffable anguish subsided, he felt stunned and stupefied by the consternation which succeeded. In his soul there was a profound sense of the ruin of every hope, while the vista of his confused and darkling ideas was closed by the ominous looming of a gibbet. Vacantly, then, did he gaze upon the chaplain and the surgeon, and his eyes seemed to denote a sort of palsy of the brain.

The chaplain began to speak, enjoining the wretched man to tranquillize himself; while the surgeon felt his pulse and nodded encouragingly to the reverend ordinary, as much as to imply that he would soon recover his mental equilibrium. And it was so. Gradually did Emmerson's ideas settle themselves in his brain, and he began to understand the words that were addressed to him. On thus recognizing the chaplain and the surgeon, he felt an instinctive necessity of exercising control over himself, and while pondering this idea in his mind, the thought struck him that if he did not do so, he would most likely have a turnkey set to watch him, in which case, farewell to every hope of escaping from that dreadful place.

Recovering his composure, then, he began to talk rationally, observing that it was a sudden and overpowering paroxysm of feeling which had seized upon him, but that the holy words of the chaplain had now poured solace down into his soul.

The reverend gentleman and the surgeon shortly after

quitted the doomed man, who accordingly once more remained alone in his dungeon. Then he sat himself down at the table with the air of one who means to hold serious communing with himself. He set to work, as it were, in the difficult task of unravelling the tangled skein of his own thoughts, so that he might come to some definite conclusion as to what was to be done, or as to whether there was anything to be done at all. He said to himself, "Now let me think without excitement, as coolly as I can," and then he began to enumerate all his late friends and acquaintances, to ascertain whether there might not be one amongst them who was likely to advance a sum of money at his wife's request. Then, despite all his endeavours to reason calmly and collectedly, would come the withering, blighting thought, fatal as the blast of the simoom upon the desert, that no one would lend money to the family of a man who was doomed to be hanged. He had been a usurer himself, and he had never lent money without a security, or without a selfish purpose. Who would lend money, then, to his wife without security, and in the absence of any personal object to serve? No, not a soul.

As he came to this conclusion, he sat in the stupor of dismay, gazing vacantly before him, but in reality seeing nothing outwardly, though inwardly his mind was busy with all kinds of harrowing thoughts. Then he insensibly fell into the most torturing imaginings. His fancy became marvellously fertile and wonderfully ingenious, conjuring up the whole hideous panorama presented by the Old Bailey on an execution day. He beheld the gathered multitudes, the windows thronged with human faces, the front of Newgate, so ominous in its aspect even on the sunniest day, and the gallows standing on the edge of the pavement at the debtor's-door. Gradually, like a dissolving view, did the scene change on the theatre of his fevered fancy, and he now beheld the interior of the gaol on the execution morning. He thought that he saw the cell door open, the sheriff, the chaplain, the governor, and the other functionaries enter, accompanied by an individual whose sinister aspect denoted who he was. Then he thought that this individual pinioned him, and that he passed out of the cell, joining in the procession that was formed, and with solemn march threaded the numerous passages leading to the gibbet. Again, in imagination, did

he behold all the scene outside, which appeared to burst this time on his view with exceeding abruptness as he emerged forth from the debtor's-door; and then he thought he ascended the steps of the scaffold, that he stood beneath the fatal beam, that the rope was fastened around his neck, and the nightcap drawn over his face. So vividly did the wretched man depict all this to himself, thus dreaming horribly in broad daylight and while wide awake, that he groaned in the bitterness and the agony of his feelings, and this very sound which ascended up from the depths of his soul awoke him, as it were, from his frightful reverie.

"Thank God! it was only fancy," he said, aloud; but the next moment, as his eyes glanced around the cell and showed him every feature of that living sepulchre whence there was scarcely more than one step to the grave which would be hollowed to receive him in the stone passage outside, he shuddered to the extremest confines of his being, while the appalling conviction struck upon him that, though it was all fancy at the present moment, yet full soon it must be a frightful reality.

Presently his wife and daughter came, and he overwhelmed them with the bitterest reproaches on account of the seizure of the money by the sheriff's myrmidons. As if it were their fault! But he was in that fearful mood which requires to vent its spleen and malignity upon some one. He accordingly laid the whole blame to them. They should have secured the money elsewhere, they should have denied that they had any, they should not have allowed the search, in fact, according to his account, there were a thousand things which they should have done upon the occasion, but which they did not do.

Suddenly a thought struck him, — yes, a new hope, flashing up like a spark thrown off all in a moment from the fever-heat of his imagination. And now he became all coaxing and good humour and cajolery and fawning meanness toward his wife and daughter, whom he had just been abusing so bitterly and loading with such coarse invectives; but he wished them to take in hand this new idea which had occurred to him, and which had so promptly sprung up into the consistency of hope in his mind.

His wife must at once present a memorial to the government, beseeching it to abandon its claim upon the money

seized by the sheriff. This was Emmerson's new idea, and having done his best to conciliate his wife and daughter, he proceeded to explain what they were to do. They must at once go and get the memorial drawn up by a law-stationer, who could do it in an hour or two, at the outside. Then they must go to the Home Secretary, either that evening or betimes on the following day, and get the Minister to submit it at once to the prince regent. In fact, Emmerson, rendered almost sanguine in this new hope, assured his wife that the plan must succeed if she only managed it properly. She promised to do her best, indeed, to follow all his directions, and then, with the heat of impatience that she should at once commence the work, he hurried her and Arabella away.

A week now passed. We could, if we chose, pause to analyze every feeling which the unhappy man experienced during this interval; we might dissect all the varying emotions that made up the sum of his heart's fevered existence for those seven days. But to do this would be not merely to occupy pages or to fill chapters, but to engage whole volumes. For a week in the life of a man in the great world, moving about at freedom, not knowing when death will come, and not troubling himself, either, about the matter, is a space of time of comparatively little importance, and is so readily flung away. A week's holiday, a week's pleasure, a week's shooting, a week at the seaside, thus lightly, casually, and indifferently may a week be spoken of and passed. But a week to the man who is doomed to die, who has heard his death-sentence pronounced, who is locked up and chained within the massive walls of a dungeon, so that he may not fly from that sentence, who knows that unless something should occur to save him he must be led forth to die on a particular day, at a particular hour, and even within a few minutes more or less of that hour — oh, to a man in such a condition as this a week is so precious that every moment may be enumerated, and not a single instant may be wasted. In that week, then, his thoughts are things, his ideas are facts. The minutest sentiment that his imagination experiences has all the gravity of an important incident, his very looks express worlds of emotion. To grapple, therefore, with a subject so vast, so immense, so illimitable as this were impossible for any writer. But, oh, does not the bare idea

of the rending excruciations, the agonizing crucifixions which the doomed man thus endures, does it not, we ask, furnish a tremendous argument against the punishment of death?

It was a week of such mental tortures as these which Emmerson endured. Still did he cling to that last hope which he had conceived, and which was based upon the memorial to the Crown. But the bare fact of his entertaining such a hope aggravated the agonies of suspense and kept his mind in a continual whirl of exciting fears, misgivings, and apprehensions, with the equally harrowing, wearing, tearing process of endeavouring to reason against them. Yes, thus did a week pass. The memorial had been duly drawn up according to his instructions, and it had been sent to the Home Secretary, who declined to receive Mrs. Emmerson personally on the subject. It had been sent, then, and the cold, formal answer was returned that it would receive attention and be laid before his Royal Highness the Prince Regent in due course. Then day after day passed, no further notice was taken of the memorial, and thus had a whole week elapsed.

One morning, at the expiration of the interval just named, the governor of Newgate entered the condemned cell, and the wretched Emmerson immediately saw that some dreadful announcement was forthcoming. And it was so. After a few prefatory remarks, of what the governor considered to be of a suitable character, he proceeded to state that the recorder had made his report to the prince regent, and that Emmerson's execution was fixed to take place on the following Monday. This was Friday, and Emmerson might now not merely calculate the days, not only the hours, but likewise the very minutes he had to live.

When again alone, he sat down upon his bed, covered his face with his hands, and moaned bitterly. Death now seemed to be looking him in the face, and such a dreadful death, too. But the memorial? Surely some attention must have been paid to it? If so, and if the money were to be returned, was there not yet time to do all that was needed to accomplish his release? Yes; and now the infatuated man, once more abandoning himself to hope, began to calculate how much might be done in the space of time still remaining. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, three whole

days, and in that interval a thousand rescues might be achieved.

Presently his wife and daughter made their appearance. The former looked really and truly sorrowful, the latter was weeping bitterly; for on arriving at the prison they were told by the governor that the recorder's report had been made, that no commutation of the death-sentence had been ordered, but that the execution was fixed for the ensuing Monday. Therefore, as they entered the condemned cell on this occasion, they felt as if they were coming into the presence of the dead, and Emmerson, with all the keenness which the horrors of his situation had given to every faculty, at once comprehended what they felt and what was passing in their minds.

"Ah! you have heard the news, then?" he exclaimed, "and now you are aware of how long a time I have to live, unless, indeed, something strenuous, something determined and prompt, is done at once on my behalf."

"But what can be done?" asked Arabella, who could not help thinking that her father disengaged himself somewhat quickly and even petulantly from her embrace. "You see no reply is sent to the memorial."

"That is the very thing I wish you to see about at once. You have neglected it, you have not done your duty, you should have gone day after day and hour after hour to the Home Office. Good God! do you know what it is that depends upon that memorial? It is a life, a human life — my life!" and the wretched man shrieked out the words in frenzied anguish.

"Compose yourself, dear father, for God's sake, compose yourself," said Arabella. "Mother and I will at once go off to the Home Office."

"Yes, go, for Heaven's sake, go, my dear wife, my dear daughter," exclaimed Emmerson, still in wild accents and with almost frantic impetuosity of manner. "Forgive me if I have been harsh or unkind, if I have said anything cruel or hasty. But, O God! you know not how fearfully, how tremendously a man's temper is tried, ay, and how goadingly his nerves are excited, by such a position as this. Look you both for a moment," he continued, with so ghastly an expression of countenance that the feelings it indicated were beyond all power of utterance, as they are likewise

beyond the possibility of description, "look, I say. I am alive now. Here, I can walk. See, I can walk across this room — no, cell we will call it, for so it is, and I can move my arms, too. Look, I can extend them in any direction I choose. And observe, as I stretch out my hands, I can move about my fingers, and there is vitality in them, and the very nails themselves show animation and life. Then, look at my eyes. I can see with them, and they also are indicative of life. You hear me talking. My lips move, my tongue moves, also, and my voice sounds upon your ear. Yes, and I can think, too — Eternal God! how acute is that power of thought which thou hast given unto man! Moreover, I can hear my heart beat, and in all respects I have a consciousness of life, a knowledge that I am alive, a conviction that I am a moving, sentient, animated being. Well, all this you know, and I know, too. But a day, an hour, even a very minute is fixed when all this is to cease. Those vital energies and living faculties which I have been describing are not gradually to waste themselves out and expire by degrees, but are to be extinguished all in a moment. Yes, there will be one instant when it shall be alive, capable of moving, thinking and speaking, as I move, think, and speak now, and the next instant all will be over. The power of thought, movement, and speech will be annihilated in a moment. It will be the same as suddenly extinguishing a lamp, just the same as suddenly turning off the gas in a room, while the eye winks, changing everything from light to darkness. Now, such is my doom, unless you prove successful in getting back the money, so as to use it as a means for my deliverance."

It was a fearful thing to hear that condemned man thus reason, with a mingled frenzy and philosophy, upon his dread position. There was a wildness so awful, but at the same time so ghastly in his looks, that it made him seem as if it were a maniac talking reason, as if a horrible lucidity of language was united with a shocking rabidness of feeling. A deep, deep impression was made upon the wife and daughter. The cold indifference of the former, which had already yielded to sorrow, now melted into bitter tears, and the genuine grief of the latter was enhanced into the wildest despair. Altogether it was indeed an awful, awful

spectacle and one which does no credit to the boasted humanity, wisdom, and justice of England's laws.

But now let us pause for a few moments to ascertain the reason why the memorial sent to the Home Office had not as yet received any attention. It was not so much the fault of the Minister as that of the prince regent. The Minister had gone with it in his pocket half a dozen times to Carlton House, during the week that had elapsed; but on one occasion "his Royal Highness was so particularly engaged (in Venetia's boudoir) that he could not see anybody;" on another occasion "he was so very seriously indisposed (being awfully drunk) that he could not attend to business." Next time "he was engaged in a matter of great domestic delicacy" (with a troop of dancing-girls in one of his gorgeous saloons); and on the fourth occasion "he had met with so severe an accident (through tripping on the stairs when drunk and incapable) that his physician had ordered him not to be disturbed." On another occasion "his Royal Highness had gone to Windsor to manifest his filial regard toward an afflicted sire" (in reality to see how long the old boy was likely to be before he hopped the twig); and another time when the Minister did succeed in gaining access to his Royal Highness, "he was so overcome by his feelings (Curaçoa punch) on hearing the nature of the memorial, that he burst into tears (or, in vulgar parlance, was crying drunk) and begged that the matter might be postponed to a future occasion."

Such were the reasons which must account for the silence that had been observed relative to Mrs. Emmerson's memorial. But when she and Arabella repaired to the Home Office, after the interview with Emmerson as above described, they did succeed in obtaining an interview with the Minister, who addressed them in the following terms:

"Ladies, I can assure you that I lost no time in submitting your memorial to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent; and his Royal Highness, with that compassionating disposition which so nobly characterizes him, and with that zeal and anxiety which he ever experiences to do justice to all his august father's dutiful and loving subjects, at once took the memorial under his royal consideration. What advice I, as a Cabinet Minister, may have given his Royal Highness

on the subject, cannot of course be revealed, and whatever view his Royal Highness has as yet been induced to take of the matter, must not be disclosed. Ladies, I hope that this explanation will prove completely satisfactory; and in the unfortunate position in which you are placed, it must be a source of great consolation, not to say gratification, to you to know that you possess a prince who, while exercising his august father's authority, devotes himself, night and day, to the interests of all classes in the kingdom."

Having thus spoken, with the proper ministerial mixture of official pomposity and diplomatic blandness, the Home Secretary rang the bell, as much as to intimate that the interview was at an end. Mrs. Emmerson was completely bewildered, having vainly endeavoured to discover in that cloud of words an answer to her question relative to the fate of the memorial, and she was about to withdraw, thinking that the answer must have been given, but that she had not comprehended it. Arabella, somewhat more sharp-witted, perceived that no definite reply had been given at all, and she accordingly ventured to remind the Home Minister that he had forgotten the main point for which he so condescendingly granted herself and mother an interview. Thereupon the Minister gave an assurance that the matter should have his very best consideration next week.

"Next week!" shrieked forth Arabella, unmindful of what she said, "but you have ordered my unhappy father to undergo his sentence next Monday."

"Miss Emmerson," returned the Minister, in an offhand manner, "it can make no earthly difference to your father whether you get back the money before or after Monday next. His concerns with this life are terminated."

Thereupon he again rang the bell, and the two ladies withdrew. A livery servant conducted them down-stairs, while descending which they exchanged looks of blank despair. They now reëntered the hackney-coach which had brought them to Downing Street, and hastened back to Newgate, where they imparted to Emmerson the details of their interview with the Home Secretary.

"Then all hope has now abandoned me!" exclaimed the unhappy man, and flinging himself upon the bed, he gave way to an awful outburst of the most violent mental agony.

It was Sunday night, and the last hours of the doomed man's life were slowly lapsing into the eternity of the past. He had no more hope now. Indeed, he sought as well as he could to avert his reflections from the affairs of this world.

He had taken leave of his wife and daughter, and when that was over, he felt as if the last straw of hope at which it was possible for him to catch had disappeared. Not that through any feeling of fondness he beheld in them the personification of tender ties linking him to this life, but because it seemed as if there were nothing more to be done by them for the purpose of saving that life. He now felt that he was indeed doomed, that his fate was inevitable, and that in a few short hours he should be no more.

Not one wink of sleep did the unhappy man obtain throughout that night. He had slept his last sleep in this life, and the present vigil was to close only in the stupendous sleep of death.

Alone he sat in his cell, where a candle burned dimly and fitfully. The Bible was spread open before him, but he could not settle his ideas to read it. Horrible thoughts were agitating in his mind, like grisly phantoms peopling a dark Gothic hall in some ancient castle. He felt as a man who is slowly but surely and irresistibly walking toward the edge of a precipice, over which at a fixed hour, and indeed at a fixed moment, he will fall abruptly. His physical sensations were as intense as his mental ones. His head ached to distraction; it was such a headache as no ordinary experience in such pain can possibly understand. There was a fulness about the temples that seemed as if the brain were swelling to a compass too large to be contained within the skull, and that it was trying to burst through its walls of bone, and flesh, and skin, but could not. There was an excruciating tightness across the eyes, as if a ligature were bound around the head, without interfering with the sight, but drawn to a degree of tension as to become a veritable martyrdom. Besides this agonizing pain, there was a sense of deep oppression at the chest, and in the stomach a profound sinking, as if all were hollow within and the flesh were about to give way. In addition to these sensations, there was a nervous movement of the toes, accompanied by a noise like the cracking of the bones in the feet, especially if the unhappy man rose to pace his cell, as he frequently did in

the depth of that long night which seemed to him a thousand years. Then did this ominous cracking of the bones appear redolent of death itself, and made him fancy that he was a moving corpse, a walking skeleton.

As morning came on, the various sensations of pain and uneasiness which the doomed man felt augmented in intenseness. Indeed, the headache grew insupportable, the tightness across the eyes more full of anguish than aught he could possibly have conceived. Once or twice he lay down in the hope that a reclining posture would give him relief, but the agony became all the more severe, and indeed the fearful excitement of his thoughts would not permit him to remain stationary.

As the dawn glimmered into that condemned cell, and about the same time the candle expired in its socket, the approach of day seemed to add to the already insupportable pain in the temples, while the tightness over the eyes made him feel as if an iron hoop had been fastened around his head and was now being screwed up to its last hold.

The chaplain presently entered the condemned cell, and began to offer the consolations of religion. Emmerson sat down and listened, but he could not fix his thoughts upon anything the reverend gentleman said. He tried to comprehend the ordinary's words, but could not. His brain was confused, but not with a numbness; it was racked with the bewilderment of a myriad torturing, harrowing, agonizing thoughts.

The morning advanced, and breakfast was brought in to the convict. He endeavoured to drink some coffee, but it seemed to choke him. He could not possibly get his throat to perform its usual functions and swallow it; and when he essayed to force himself to eat a mouthful of bread, it was the same as if he tried to masticate an object as dry as a cinder. Again he attempted to drink, but it was with a strong recoil, a loathing, and a powerlessness to swallow, as if he were seized with hydrophobia.

Again did the chaplain endeavour to fix him to his devotions, but though Emmerson would sit for ten minutes at a time gazing on the reverend gentleman, and to all appearance listening intently, devoutly, yet he really distinguished nought that was said, merely heard a humming, droning noise that seemed to have no sense nor meaning. Then he

would start up and walk wildly to and fro in his cell, the cracking of his bones mingling horribly with the clanking of his chains, and then he would sit down on his pallet and give way to a violent outburst of anguish. Or else he would begin to load himself with bitterest reproaches for having been so mad as to have done the deed that made him what he was, a doomed man.

Thus did the time pass away until eight o'clock, the fatal hour, was approaching. Then at every sound which met his ear did the pulses quiver throughout his frame with an agony beyond all description. Each time he thought they were coming to bear him away to death. At length the door opened, and the heralds of his doom made their appearances, governor, sheriffs, under-sheriffs, javelin-men, and, last of all, an individual whose sinister look was more than enough to tell who he was and proclaim his errand.

And now commenced the dread ceremony of knocking off the irons from the doomed man's limbs, and then the process of pinioning, to all of which he submitted without the slightest resistance. Resistance indeed! The idea did not once enter his head, for strong and firm and indomitable upon him sat the conviction that his fate was at hand and that nothing could avert it.

The preliminaries being all settled, and Daniel Coffin having thus far made his preparatory arrangements, the procession of death began moving away from the condemned cell, through the stone passages, to the scaffold. All that Emmerson had previously pictured to himself in the dread phases of those reveries of which we have before spoken was now not merely realized, but even transcended in all the horror of reality. Vain were it for us to attempt to delineate the feelings which he experienced as he walked on to death, advancing toward the edge of that precipice over which he was to topple suddenly, Heaven alone knew into what realm to pass.

And now he reaches the debtor's-door, and the whole panorama of life and excitement and animation without bursts upon his view. He ascends the scaffold, and the newspapers, in giving an account next morning of the execution, declared that he went up the ladder with firm steps. Ah! it was no spontaneous and willing fortitude which he thus evinced, no deliberate evidence of a mind nerved to

endure the very worst. Whatever physical energy he might have thus displayed was purely mechanical, and showed that the movements of his limbs were at the time apart from any influence wielded by the agonizing sensations of the mind.

The crowd was immense, and as he mounted the platform of the huge scaffold, all black and ominous, a profound silence fell upon that countless mass which paved street, window, and housetop, far as the eye could stretch, with faces. Myriads of eyes all seemed to make him their common focus, and for an instant he recoiled, he shrank, indeed, as if those looks were the rays of ten thousand burning glasses all fixed upon him and scorching him to the very heart's core.

"Courage, sir," whispered Daniel Coffin, "and it will soon be over. Now, then, for the nightcap."

As he thus spoke the dreadful man's rude hands grasped the nightcap which had already been placed on Emmerson's head, but just at the very instant it was about to be drawn down over his face, he caught a glimpse of a well-known countenance that was upturned toward the scaffold from the very first rank of the vast crowd pressing around the barrier. A horrible feeling, more horrible than can be well conceived even in the midst of feelings which were all intensely horrible, seized upon the wretched Emmerson as he thus caught the look which was turned upward with diabolical malignity toward him, for that countenance which thus appeared there to mock his last dying agonies was Theodore Varian's.

A groan, but a subdued and half-stifled one, came up to Emmerson's lips as he thus felt not only how he was punished for all he had done to that young man, but also how terribly that young man himself had avenged the injuries he had received; and while this reflection was sweeping like a scorching trail of fire through Emmerson's brain, the nightcap was drawn down over his face, the halter being already affixed to his neck.

"O God! O God!" moaned the wretched man, — wretched, wretched beyond the power of imagination to conceive or of language to describe, as he stood for about the interval of twenty seconds on the drop while Daniel Coffin descended to pull the bolt and let it fall.

The bell of St. Sepulchre was tolling with lugubrious note,

and the chaplain was droning forth the solemn service for the dead. A breathless silence seemed to sit like a spell upon the multitude, and all this while the sun was shining bright in its golden glory upon the tremendous scene. And in the midst of those sounds of church bell and of prayer, in the midst of that deep, stupendous silence which hushed the breath of ten thousand spectators gathered there, and in the midst, too, of the glow of the effulgent sunlight, did the last phase of the tragedy suddenly take place. The bolt was drawn, the drop fell, and in a few seconds all was over.

The once eminent City money-broker was dead, and the crowd waited an hour to see him taken down. Be assured, reader, that Theodore Varian remained until the very last. Yes, he remained until the clock struck nine, when Daniel Coffin cut the corpse down and let it fall into the shell which was ready for its reception in the hollow of the scaffold.

There was now no more to see. Theodore Varian had pursued his vengeance up to the very last, and as the crowds dispersed slowly, he took his departure more slowly still, as if still inclined to linger, with a sort of horrible morbid gloating, near the spot where his mortal enemy had just gone out of existence.

But on leaving that fatal scene did he at once return to his sister Ariadne, to tell her how Emmerson had died and all the particulars of the execution? No, for Ariadne would have shrunk from such abhorrent details.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

VALENTINE MALVERN

The reader will remember that conversation which took place between the beautiful Florence Eaton and the handsome Valentine Malvern on the day when their love for each other was revealed. In their mutual frankness they had laid bare their hearts' secrets, and while Valentine candidly informed Florence that he could never rest quiet until he should have penetrated the mystery of his father's fate, the young lady confessed to him that the particulars of her interview with the prince regent at St. James's Palace some months previously had appeared to interweave themselves with her destiny. The reader perhaps will likewise remember that Valentine promised to do his best in order to discover if there were indeed any particular secret connected with the proceedings of that interview, and with the miniature which had produced so powerful a sensation upon his Royal Highness.

On subsequently reflecting with due calmness upon this pledge which he had given, Valentine felt annoyed with himself, for he knew not how he could possibly take any steps in the matter. Besides, he considered that if there were really anything to tell, and anything with which Florence herself might in propriety be made acquainted, Lady Florimel would not have kept her in the dark upon the subject. Therefore for him to interfere in any way seemed an unwarrantable meddling in a delicate matter, and hence was it that Valentine regretted having given anything like a promise at all. But on each occasion that he saw Florence she more or less alluded to the subject, and it was indeed easy to perceive that it had made a most powerful impression upon her mind. Malvern endeavoured to reason her out of

a belief which was thus unmistakably gaining a sort of superstitious ascendency over her, but she assured him that so strong was the influence thus left upon her imagination by the occurrences of the interview with the prince that unless the mystery were cleared up it would produce the effect of a secret grief preying upon her mind.

"I know," Florence would say to her lover, on those occasions when they were alone together, and the topic was touched upon, "that you must think me foolish and weak-minded to suffer that occurrence to wield such a power over me. But I cannot help it. It is a feeling against which there is no battling, no struggling. It is stronger than I, and capable of subduing any amount of mental energy which I possess. It is a presentiment which has entered into my mind, and now forms part of it. It is as if the mysterious voice of an inward nature were speaking in my soul."

In such language as this would the beautiful Florence Eaton address Valentine when they were together; and as he was now her acknowledged suitor, not only accepted by herself but also formally recognized as such by Lord and Lady Florimel, he was a daily visitor at the house. Often did he represent to Florence that the most prudent step to be taken would be either for her to confess, or for him to represent, to Lord and Lady Florimel the nature of the mystic feelings which were thus preying, as it were, upon her. Yielding to his advice, and being unwilling that any steps should be taken which might savour of undutifulness or of ingratitude toward her kind relatives, Florence at length gave Valentine permission to adopt exactly what course he might think fit in the matter. He accordingly at once resolved to be candid and explicit with Lady Florimel, and seeking an immediate interview with her, he explained all that Florence had at any time said to him relative to the impression made upon her mind by the interview with the prince regent and the affair of the miniature portrait.

Pauline listened with the deepest attention and with an equal amount of interest. Her countenance grew serious, with a shade of melancholy also, as Valentine proceeded, and when he had finished she remained for some time silent and lost in thought.

"My dear Mr. Malvern," she said, at length breaking silence, "as the future husband of my much-loved niece,

you have a right to demand every explanation relative to anything that may seem to concern her. Yes, there is indeed a secret connected with that dear girl, a secret which also regards one who when alive was most dear unto myself, — I mean my sister, the mother of Florence. Fain would I that this secret should have remained entombed with her who has long ago gone down into the silent grave, but it seems to me now as if fate has determined that it shall be otherwise. However, this secret is not entirely at my own disposal, nor indeed should I of my own accord feel justified in revealing it."

She paused, sighed profoundly, and gazed with melancholy looks upon a portrait of Octavia, her departed sister, which hung in the room where this interview took place. Valentine Malvern said nothing. Indeed, he knew not what to say; he was almost sorry that he had entered upon the topic at all, and yet it was so absolutely necessary to take some step to satisfy his beloved Florence.

"Yes," continued Pauline, in melancholy accents, while her truly handsome countenance was shaded with a kindred expression, "both I and my husband have observed for some months past that the incidents at the palace were not forgotten by Florence. Deeply have I regretted that I ever should have taken her thither, and have thus placed her in a position of receiving impressions which, when nature's voice speaks out thus, are indeed but too well calculated to make a powerful impression upon her young, artless, and susceptible mind. Until now it has always been my endeavour as well as my hope to conceal from Florence a secret the knowledge of which is by no means necessary to her happiness and welfare, but which may interfere with the healthy equanimity of her mind. But it seems, as I have already said, that this secret is not to be concealed, and therefore, since fate has decreed that it must be made known, as well now as at any future period. But again I repeat, my dear Mr. Malvern, that from my lips you cannot learn it. This secret is not altogether mine, and from the individual whom it more especially concerns must you seek the revelation of the mystery. Go to him, therefore, go forthwith, tell him who you are, that you are the accepted suitor of Florence Eaton, and that you have come to learn from his lips all he may choose to reveal concerning her."

" But you have not named him — I mean the personage to whom your ladyship alludes," exclaimed Valentine, though more than half-suspecting who it was that her words thus indicated, — yes, and likewise already beginning to entertain some conception of the nature of that secret he was seeking to penetrate.

" The personage to whom you are to address yourself," replied Pauline, solemnly, " is his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I can now tell you no more. Go and see him at once."

With these words Lady Florimel rose abruptly from her seat and hurried from the room, in order to seek the solitude of her own chamber and give vent to the varied feelings of affliction and sorrow which the preceding discourse conjured up. Then, so soon as she had somewhat composed her mind, she despatched a hasty note to the prince regent, giving a few necessary explanations, so that he might not be altogether unprepared for the visit of Valentine Malvern.

Immediately after his interview with Lady Florimel, Malvern returned to the apartment where Florence was anxiously awaiting him, and the moment he reéntered that room, she hastened to meet him, gazing up into his countenance with an expression of mingled curiosity, interest, and timidity.

" Your aunt, dear Florence, and I," commenced Valentine, " have had a most serious conversation together. She is not offended with you; she is not angry at the questions which have been put to her. On the contrary, she herself has seen the influence which that occurrence at St. James's Palace produced upon your mind, and she admits that the time is come when the secret must be revealed to you."

" Ah! then there is a secret," exclaimed Florence, an expression of intense anxiety now appearing upon her lovely countenance.

" Yes, there is a secret, dearest," returned Valentine, " but as yet I know it not. It is to be learned elsewhere, and I am now about to proceed in the investigation. Ask me no more questions at the present moment. I go at once upon this mission. On my return you will perhaps know all. An hour or two, or, if not to-day, most assuredly to-morrow, will clear up all your suspense. Can you not, dearest Florence, control your feelings? "

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed. "Were I so weak-minded as not to be able to do that, I should scarcely be worthy of your esteem and confidence. Besides, if for months past I have supported and borne up against this torturing influence which has been gnawing, as it were, at my very heart's core, surely I can now endure suspense for a few hours, or even a few days longer. Go, then, Valentine, and accomplish your mission, whatever and wherever it may be. I ask no more at present."

The young gentleman embraced the beautiful girl, and then took his leave.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon, and Valentine knew it to be a very likely hour to obtain an audience of his Royal Highness. He accordingly repaired at once to Carlton House, entered the waiting-room, and gave his card in the usual manner to the principal valet in attendance. In about a quarter of an hour Malvern was informed that his Royal Highness was most particularly engaged for the present, but that if he would return at nine o'clock in the evening, the prince would cheerfully grant him an interview, and indeed wished, on his own part, to see him.

Thereupon Valentine Malvern took his departure from Carlton House, wondering what the last portion of the message could mean. But he did not go back again that afternoon to Florence. He thought it likely that not only she and her aunt might have some serious conversation together after what had taken place, but he likewise felt that it was better not to provoke any mental excitement by running backwards and forwards merely to acquaint her with what was being done. Accordingly, to while away the time until his dinner-hour, Malvern proceeded to Long Acre, where he called upon Mr. Lawrence Sampson, as was indeed frequently his wont, to ascertain whether any further clue had been discovered to the mysterious disappearance of the late Sir Archibald Malvern.

"I have not lost sight of the matter, sir," said the famous Bow Street officer, in answer to Valentine's inquiries, "but the affair is still wrapped in as dark a cloud as ever. The only clue which we have obtained is that letter which shows that your father, sir, was engaged in an affair of gallantry. It is a strange thing that this letter should be in the very same identical handwriting as that one which was written

to give information about Paul Dysart, who was hanged at the Old Bailey, you remember."

"A beautiful, fluent, and ladylike writing," observed Valentine. "Indeed, it is an elegant hand. Ah! would to Heaven that we could discover the authoress!"

"Yes, sir," continued Sampson. "I myself have all along entertained the opinion that your lamented father has fallen a victim to female jealousy, because the woman who could have given Paul Dysart up to the hangman was not likely to have hesitated to avenge herself upon Sir Archibald Malvern, supposing that he had done anything to provoke her resentment."

"Your inference is a natural one," said the young gentleman. "Let me look once more at that letter of which you first spoke, and which I discovered amongst my father's papers. I think that I left it in your hands."

Larry Sampson opened an iron safe, and from a bundle of papers produced a letter which he handed Valentine, saying, "Here is the one to which you allude. The writing is as similar as possible to that other one which was sent to the magistrate at Bow Street, and which gave the information that led to the capture of Dysart. But that one I have not got now. However, you saw it at the time, and were struck by the resemblance."

Malvern took the letter which Sampson, while thus talking, handed to him, and as he perused the anonymous epistle, his countenance grew deeply mournful.

"Yes," he said, "I recollect the similitude between the two letters, recollect it as well, indeed, as if the other one were before me now. There cannot be a shadow of a doubt as to the identity of the two hands. But, by the bye, when you called upon Lady Ernestina Dysart at the time, and she informed you that she had not the slightest idea of any gallant intrigue which her husband was carrying on nor of any female who was likely to take so vindictive a step as that evidenced by the anonymous letter sent to the magistrate, she kept that anonymous letter, did she not?"

"Yes, to show to her husband, who was then in Newgate," answered Sampson. "She did not return the letter to me, and after all the trouble she gave herself in the matter, overwhelmed with calamity, too, at the time, I did not like to call a second time and ask for it."

"No, certainly not," exclaimed Malvern. "But pray do not lose sight of the inquiry altogether," he continued. "Keep this letter, and the chapter of accidents may one of these days, sooner or later, turn up something which may lead us a step farther in the investigation, perhaps elucidate the mystery altogether."

Having thus spoken, Malvern threw a bank-note upon the table by way of a "refresher" for the Bow Street officer, and then took his departure.

Precisely at nine o'clock in the evening did Valentine present himself at Carlton House, and the same valet whom he had seen in the morning at once conducted him up the splendid staircase to a small but elegant parlour in the suite of apartments specially appropriated to the prince's use. His Royal Highness was not there at the moment, and the valet requested Malvern to be seated, stating that the prince would join him in a few minutes.

When left alone, Valentine could not help admiring the tasteful richness of the furniture and the elegance of the ornaments scattered about. Notwithstanding the important matter uppermost in his thoughts, and the belief that he was about to hear some very grave and solemn secret relative to his beloved Florence, yet his well-cultivated mind could still experience an interest in the magnificence of three or four pictures which hung to the walls, the chaste elegance of a few specimens of sculptured alabaster, and likewise the rich colouring of some porcelain vases whence odours were distilled. His attention was also drawn toward the mantelpiece, where an ebony stand sustained a French ormolu clock in the middle of which there was a hollow containing several figures of men and women, about an inch in height, beautifully carved in ivory, and coloured to imitate life, all moving about in obedience to the hidden mechanism.

While standing near the chimneypiece contemplating this beautiful clock, Valentine's eyes suddenly encountered a portion of a letter which had been thrust behind another ornament on the mantel. But why does Malvern start in sudden amazement? Why do his eyes remain fixed with a strange expression upon that portion of a note? It is because, in consequence of its being torn, some of the writing is visible, and this writing bears the most perfect resemblance to that

of the note which in the afternoon he so attentively scanned at Larry Sampson's house.

Let us here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had lunched by himself in this particular room in the middle of the day, and that he had afterward indulged in a cigar. A wax-taper had been placed on the table, but as the prince could not possibly bear the idea of putting his cigar in contact with the wick of a candle he had taken from his pocket a note which he had a little while previously received, and whence he tore off a portion wherewith to light the cigar. The other portion he negligently left lying on the table, and when the domestics entered at a later hour to clear away the things and put the room in order, one of them had placed the remnant of that letter on the mantel, not knowing whether it might be inquired for again or not.

Such was the way in which this portion of the letter came to be in the place where it now attracted the notice and at once riveted the gaze of Valentine Malvern. For nearly a minute did he stand motionless as a statue, but with lips apart, his countenance pale and anxious, and his eyes fixed upon the object of this profound and concentrated interest. At length, and with a sudden start, he reached forth his hand, took the note, and without further reflection or hesitation, examined it with the closest scrutiny. And who can blame him? It was an impulsive deed. A father's fate was uppermost in the young man's mind. It was no vulgar feeling of curiosity; on the contrary, it was an act produced by the generous prompting of a strong filial piety. No thought had he at the moment of penetrating into the secrets of others, or violating the sanctity of private correspondence. One sentiment, and one only, was dominant in his soul, namely, the hope of discovering something that might elucidate the mystery of a deplored father's loss.

While examining the writing to convince himself that it was the same as the two notes already alluded to, he insensibly read all that was upon this fragment of a letter which he was inspecting, and these were the words which his eyes thus followed:

"July 10, 1815.

"My dear Prince: — You will doubtless be surprised to receive a letter from me. But I am most anxious to see your Royal Highness. I am leading a life which is perfectly

miserable, — monotonous, gloomy, lonely to a degree. You, who are so fond of pleasure, must pity me in the dulness of that solitary retreat whence I write this. Indeed, I can endure it no longer, and shall be up in London to-morrow, when I shall take the liberty of calling upon your Royal Highness. But will it be a liberty? After all that has occurred between us, I hope not. Indeed, I flatter myself that I shall be welcomed by your Royal Highness. Believe me, my dear prince, I often, often think of you. Ah! if you only thought of me one-tenth part as often, I should indeed be ensured the kindest reception at your hands. However, to-morrow evening, at ten o'clock precisely, I shall put your humour to the test by presenting myself at the private staircase, when, if you mean to be amiable toward me, you will give orders that I shall not be kept waiting a moment; and I will then explain to you why it is, unless, indeed you already surmise the reasons wherefore I have withdrawn so long from London and . . ."

All the rest of the letter was torn away, but those lines which Malvern had just read, contained an important announcement. The letter had been written on the previous day. It was therefore on this very evening, at ten o'clock, that the writer of it purposed to call upon the prince regent. But who could the lady be that was evidently on such familiar terms with his Royal Highness? Was it not fair to suppose that she was some person of rank and consequence? But what a dangerous as well as profligate character she must be, thought Valentine, if she had indeed anything to do with his father's disappearance. At all events, she assuredly had surrendered Dysart up to the scaffold, and therefore was she not dangerous to a degree? As for her profligacy, it was but too evident that she had been intimate with his father and with the prince regent, most likely with Dysart also.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through Malvern's brain as he hastily replaced the letter, or, rather, the fragment of a letter, upon the mantel, and scarcely had he done this when the prince regent entered the room.

Advancing with the utmost affability, and what court sycophancy would term "the most gracious condescension," he at once gave the young gentleman his hand, saying,

" Sir Valentine Malvern, for so I suppose I must call you, I bid you welcome here. Nay, be not astonished at this declaration on my part. Did not my domestic assure you to-day that I should be very glad to see you this evening? "

" I did indeed receive such a kind message from your Royal Highness," answered Valentine, " and you must permit me, sir, to express my profound gratitude."

" Sit down," said the prince, " and we will talk together. I know why you have come. Indeed, a minute or two before you called this afternoon, I received a note from Lady Florimel to tell me that you were coming, and what your object was in seeking an interview with me. I sent down to assure you that I should be glad to see you in the evening, because, as I learn from Lady Florimel's note, you are engaged to her niece, Miss Florence Eaton, and I am much interested in that young lady. Can you not suspect, have you no idea of the cause of this interest which I feel toward Florence? " and as the prince gave utterance to this question, his manner grew serious and a shade fell over his countenance, for of all his many, many mistresses, either living or dead, he could perhaps speak lightly and indifferently, but not of that bright and beauteous creature who had loved him so tenderly and so well, the injured, the ill-used, the perished Octavia.

" Some suspicion floats dimly and vaguely in my mind," answered Malvern, perceiving how much the prince was moved as he spoke, knowing how much it took to move the prince at all, and from all this receiving an additional impulse for his conjectures, " but to that suspicion I dare not give utterance."

" And why not? " asked his Royal Highness, gazing earnestly upon the young man.

" Because," he rejoined, " to breathe the suspicion which previous circumstances had engendered, and which your present words, sir, as well as your looks, have strengthened in my mind, would be to impeach the honour of a certain lady who is now no more."

The prince regent sighed; then, placing his hand in a breast-pocket, he slowly drew forth a miniature portrait, set in a morocco case, and handing it to Malvern, he said, " It is the likeness of one who loved me well, too well, too well, far better than I deserved."

"Then, sir, my suspicion is confirmed," said Valentine. "This is the mother of Florence, this was Octavia, Lady Marchmont."

"Yes, but she proved not unfaithful to her husband," answered the prince, in a low and mournful tone, for he felt not merely a sentiment of melancholy and remorse, but likewise of awe, when speaking of the dead Octavia. "Florence was born before she married Arthur Eaton, who subsequently became Lord Marchmont, and to him she proved a good, true, and faithful wife during the brief period they were allowed to remain in this world. To save the mother's reputation, Florence has always passed as the issue of that marriage."

"But she is in reality your Royal Highness's daughter?" said Malvern. "Oh, how inscrutable are the ways of Providence! how strange and mysterious are the instincts which stir within us! The voice of nature has been crying in her soul, her heart has yearned toward you, her father. She saw you grieved and afflicted on the occasion of that interview at St. James's Palace, and it touched the tenderest chord in her being. It was to a father's feeling that this chord responsively vibrated, and she was stricken, as it were, with a deathless sentiment toward you. She has told me that she could not be happy so long as that mysterious sensation hung quivering, as it were, in the depths of her soul, and I vowed to discover whether there was any reality in her presentient feelings, or whether she was labouring under some morbid delusion."

"Think you that she will be happier," asked the prince, "by the knowledge of this secret, or will she not feel deep sorrow at the history of what she may conceive to be a mother's shame? Take care, Malvern, how you break these tidings to her, and how you tell her the tale. I would sooner hear that harm had happened to my own legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, than know that the blight of affliction had fallen upon the heart of this sweet, this angelic girl."

It was a strange thing to hear the prince regent talk thus, for it was with a genuine emphasis and an unquestionable sincerity that he gave utterance to this solemn averment. Valentine was, of course, no stranger to the profligacy of his character, the dissolutenes of his life, and the

heartlessness of his disposition. He therefore knew that it must indeed be some powerful and exceptional sentiment that thus could bend a mind so callous and leave an impression upon a soul so saturated with all vices and demoralizing influences.

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Malvern, deeply affected, "that the secret shall be revealed to Florence in the most delicate manner possible. Lady Florimel will no doubt undertake the task herself. What person can be more fitted to do this than the amiable, the excellent, the kind-hearted relative who has been a mother to the orphan girl? But Lady Florimel felt that the secret was not her own, and must not be revealed without your Royal Highness's permission. That permission you now give?"

"Yes, freely, freely," responded the prince. "And yet it were better, so far as the world is concerned, that this secret should still remain confined to the knowledge of as few as possible."

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Malvern. "It were madness, it were wickedness, as well as being needless and useless to throw a stain upon the memory of Florence's departed mother."

"This being the understanding," resumed the prince, "I shall not attend your bridal, but my best wishes will be with you. And permit me to offer something more substantial than good wishes. What can I do for you? I have everything to give except money, and that, God knows, all prince and almost sovereign as I am, is scarce enough with me. But you are rich, I am told, and the Florimels are rich; therefore money you need not. Will you have a peerage? An excuse can easily be found for conferring it upon you."

"Accept my gratitude, sir, for this well-meant proposal," answered Valentine, "but I most respectfully decline it. I seek not honours and titles. If it should appear in the end, as I am afraid, indeed, it will, that my lamented father is no more, then am I already a baronet, and even if he should yet reappear, which, though so much to be desired, is so little probable, still do I remain the heir to his title. That title is sufficient for my ambition."

At this moment the door of the apartment opened, and Lady Sackville entered, hastily exclaiming, "Prince, why

have you left us thus? The whole company are crying out for you, and I have been looking everywhere — "

But here the brilliant Venetia stopped short, and a sudden pallor appeared upon her countenance, as well as a confusion in her manner, as her eyes now met the looks of Valentine Malvern. For he had his back toward the door at the moment she made her appearance, and now, as he rose from his seat and turned toward her, such was the impression he made upon her. As for himself, he surveyed her with evident interest, indeed, with a renewal of that feeling of mingled surprise and uncertainty which he had experienced when he saw her at St. George's Church on the day of her marriage.

" Are you acquainted with each other? " inquired the prince, " or shall I introduce you? "

" Sir Valentine Malvern, I believe? " exclaimed Venetia, recovering in a moment all her wonted presence of mind, and advancing with the utmost affability toward the young gentleman, she at once gave him her hand, observing, " Oh, yes, we are no strangers to each other," but at the same time she threw a look of the deepest meaning upon Valentine, as much as to imply that no more need be said upon the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, or how, when, and where they had met on any former occasion.

Venetia was grandly beautiful this night. She was giving a splendid entertainment in her own suite of apartments, and was attired in a sort of fancy dress as Queen of the Revels. She wore upon her head a jewelled diadem, which, bright though it were, was not more lustrous than the rich auburn of her own shining hair. Her robe was trimmed with ermine, and altogether she had a queenly look.

" Will you come and join us in the gay festivity which is now at its height? " she asked of Malvern, and her smile was full of a cordial welcome; indeed, its affability was in itself an eloquent though mute proffer of friendship.

" I thank your ladyship," answered Valentine, his manner now displaying the sentiment of interest toward Venetia, without the astonishment and doubt which had previously commingled therewith, for all uncertainty had been suddenly cleared up by her own words, and he now knew that she was the same whom he had met before, but under circumstances of a very, very different character from those in which

she was now placed. "I thank your ladyship," he continued, "for this polite, this courteous, this kind invitation, but I am about to take leave of his Royal Highness, and have then an engagement of a business nature elsewhere."

"In that case I excuse you this evening, Sir Valentine," exclaimed Venetia, "but I shall expect you to favour me with a call just the same as if you had actually been present at my soirée this evening. Now mind," she added, with a meaning glance, "I wish to see you," and as at that moment the prince was looking at his watch, and comparing it with the timepiece on the mantel, for he now suddenly recollected that other appointment which he had for ten o'clock, Lady Sackville placed her finger for a moment upon her lip, and again extending her hand affably to Valentine, wished him "good evening."

He gave a slight but perceptible inclination of his head, to show that he understood the meaning of that signal she had so rapidly made, and that he would preserve silence relative to whatever topic it was she had thus mutely but eloquently alluded to, and the brilliant Venetia then quitted the room. Valentine therefore took his leave of the prince, who shook him cordially by the hand, observing, "Whatever I can do for you, whatever favour the possession of power can bestow, you have but to name your wish at any time, and it shall be gratified."

Malvern again thanked the prince for this proffered generosity, and left the room. In the passage outside a domestic was waiting to escort him down-stairs again, and he issued forth from the palace.

But instead of proceeding straight homeward, indeed, without even quitting the vicinage of Carlton House, he hastened in the direction of the carriageway leading down to the private door. Consulting his watch by a street-lamp, he saw that it wanted five minutes to ten, and thus the hour of appointment for the prince and the writer of the letter was close at hand. At this very moment an ill-looking fellow came along Pall Mall, and Malvern, judging by his apparel that he was a man who would not refuse to go upon an errand if well paid, at once stopped him.

"I will give you a guinea," he said, "if you will run for me as far as Bow Street, or, rather, Long Acre."

"Ay, to be sure," returned the man, in a voice that was

not a whit more musical than his countenance was pleasing; but Malvern had not time to make any reflections upon all this.

"Here is the guinea," he hastily continued, "and now you must lose no time, but run up to Mr. Lawrence Sampson's. Do you know where he lives?"

"Well, I rather think I do," replied the man, with a sort of ironical tone. "Everybody knows him, and he knows everybody."

"Well, then, be quick, and tell him to come down here at once. Explain to him this very spot. You can't mistake it, — the passage leading out of Pall Mall to the private door — "

"I know all about it," interrupted the man. "What name shall I say? 'Cause why, Larry — I mean Mr. Sampson — mayn't believe me,"

"Tell him that Mr. Valentine Malvern," quickly rejoined the young gentleman, "has sent you. But one moment," he exclaimed, the thought striking him that, being paid beforehand, the fellow might not take the trouble to perform the errand. "You can come back the moment you have delivered your message; you will find me somewhere about here, and I will give you another guinea."

"Well and good," exclaimed the man. "You are a regular gentleman and no mistake," and away sped the fellow in the direction of Long Acre, muttering to himself, "Well, I'm blowed if this don't look uncommon like an adventure where accident seems resolved that I shall have the putting of a finger in the pie."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A FAVOURITE VISITRESS

When Valentine Malvern took his leave of the prince in the manner already described, his Royal Highness did not return to Lady Sackville's suite of apartments, in compliance with her request. He sent up a message to the effect that important business had just transpired to detain him away a little longer, but that he would assuredly rejoin her gay assembly by eleven o'clock.

Having taken this precaution to guard against the chance of being sought after by her during the next hour, the prince at once repaired to an apartment in the immediate vicinage of the private staircase, and which has before been described to the reader. It was that one where he received Venetia, not on the first occasion of her visit to Carlton House when still simple Miss Trelawney, but on that evening when, after her marriage with Sackville, she for the first time abandoned herself to the royal voluptuary's embrace. From this apartment a side-door opened into a bedchamber fitted up with a surpassing luxury. This door was, however, closed for the present, but no doubt the prince intended that it should presently be opened, else why had he resolved upon receiving his expected visitant in the small but sumptuously furnished apartment which he had now sought?

The table was spread with wines, and with a choice dessert of the most delicious fruits in or out of season. The curtains were drawn over the windows, the atmosphere was perfumed with flowers in porcelain vases, and the splendid lustre hanging to the ceiling diffused a golden light through the room. The general aspect thereof was luxurious to a degree, and throwing himself upon the sofa near which the table was placed, the prince began to give way to those

voluptuous reflections and sensual imaginings which were most congenial to his mind.

Although he had been moved by the nature of his interview with Valentine Malvern, yes, and more deeply moved, too, than he had perhaps been for many, many years, yet the effect soon wore off. Indeed, none of the better feelings of nature could become the means of making any permanent impression upon his mind. Nor did he allow such a salutary influence to abide with him one moment longer than he could shake it off by a natural effort or by the aid of artificial stimulants. Thus was it that on the present occasion he at once, on entering this room, had recourse to the wine-decanter to dispel the feeling of chastening sadness and mournful memory produced by the interview with Malvern, and as the fervid glow of the generous fluid suffused itself throughout his frame, he at once plunged into that fount of luxurious imaginings whence he drew his most sensual inspirations.

It was a splendid woman who was about to visit him, a woman whose voluptuous beauties were second only to those of Venetia, a woman in whose arms he had before revelled, and whose provocative powers for amorous play he well knew. What though she was not merely profligate to a degree, but also stained with crime? What though she had sought to shed human blood, and that she had only escaped being an actual murderess by the recovery of her victim? For all this the prince regent recked not. He remembered only the enchanting loveliness of her countenance, the firm and swelling fulness of her form, the passion that glowed in her fine dark eyes, the halo of sensuousness and the perfume of love in which she appeared to exist when under the influence of passion and desire.

While thus abandoning himself to his luscious imaginings, the prince was interrupted by the opening of a door covered with a velvet curtain, and his confidential valet Germain, appearing for a moment on the threshold, introduced a lady cloaked and veiled. He then immediately withdrew, the door closed, the velvet curtain fell back, and the prince hastened to give a cordial welcome to Lady Ernestina Dysart.

She was no longer dressed in mourning. Indeed, the widow's weeds which for the sake of appearances she had

worn for a few months had been for some time laid aside, and as she now put off her handsome bonnet with its thick black veil, and her mantle, so light, so elegant, and so well fitted for wear on a summer's night, she stood before the prince in a figured silk dress of the richest material, and which, setting close to her shape, revealed all its grand proportions to their utmost advantage. Cut low in the body, and leaving the arms entirely bare, that dress developed the fine contour of her person in a manner but too well calculated to produce a powerful effect upon the prince, and as he gazed upon her after conducting her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he was satisfied that no mental excitement or vexation which she might have endured had in any way marred the ravishing attractions of her charms.

Had she been a fiend in human shape, and he had known that such was the fact, still would all his ideas and all his thoughts have been absorbed in the sense of enjoyment which the contact of so splendid and voluptuous a beauty inspired. Her hair showered in light brown tresses over her shoulders so dazzling in their polished whiteness. Her neck was graceful in its swanlike curvature, and of alabaster fairness. Grandly rose her bosom from the ample chest, its full luxuriance and richness of volume making the waist seem even more delicate than it really was. Her large dark eyes, contrasting in colour so strongly with her hair, but shaded with dark lashes, were full of passion's lustre, and from beneath their fringe they flung forth wanton looks upon the prince, as if to rivet that hold which the effect of her charms had already taken upon his senses. At the same time her scarlet lips, slightly parting with a smile ineffably bewitching, revealed the pearly teeth, and her balmy breath fanned the cheek of his Royal Highness as he gradually approached his countenance toward her own.

"You are beautiful, Ernestina, beautiful as ever," he exclaimed, flinging his arms around her, and then pressing his lips to her delicious mouth. "Ah! full well do I remember the first time I ever beheld you. Beautiful enchantress, lovely deceiver that you were, you made me fancy you came from some far-off Orient clime, and such was the magic influence of your charms, that I believed you. Indeed, had you assured me that you were an angel descended from

heaven, I should have believed you equally as well, yes, I should have believed you."

"You allude, dear prince, to that memorable night," she said, with an arch smile in which were concentrated a thousand fascinations, "when you were brought in such a mysterious way to Beechey Manor, and when I appeared in the gossamer dress."

"Ah! that gossamer dress!" exclaimed the prince, not only feasting his eyes with the presence of the beauteous woman, but also his imagination with the memory of past delights. "Never, never shall I forget how wondrously it became you. You were apparelled as if in an Eastern fashion, with a splendid shawl around the waist, pearls upon the neck, and bracelets upon your arms. Oh, you looked like an Oriental Sultana, in the mingled magnificence, softness, lustre, and luxuriance of your beauty."

"You render me quite vain with all these compliments," murmured Ernestina, throwing a tremulousness into her musical voice, and fixing upon the prince the dangerous fascination of her large, dark eyes.

"No, you cannot be rendered vain, because I am paying you no compliment," he said, reclining his head upon her shoulder. "I am telling you the truth. Think you that if you were not so wondrously beautiful, think you that I should not have been offended by the stratagem set on foot that night and by the part which you played in it? But no, not for an instant did I feel vexed or angry. All the alarm and all the annoyance I had experienced, and all sense of outrage I felt, were amply compensated for by the presence of your beauty and the delights of Paradise I tasted in your arms. In respect to such scenes as those, my memory is immortal, and assuredly, Ernestina, one of the brightest chapters in my life was the adventure which made you mine on that blissful night. Nor have I forgotten the second time when we met. Do you remember? It was at your uncle, Lord Leveson's, and as I entered the room you were seated at the harp."

"Think you that my memory is less vivid than your own?" asked the wily Ernestina, drawing down the prince's head in such a way that it now rested upon her heaving bosom, "You know that I love you, my prince, and never has your image been absent from my memory since that night when

first we met at Beechey Manor. But you," she continued, with a deep sigh, " have so many lovely faces at all times to form the varied subjects of your thoughts, that when I was away doubtless my image never intruded itself upon your mind."

" On the contrary, dear Ernestina, I have thought of you often," exclaimed the prince. " Indeed, you and Lady Sackville are the two handsomest women in all England, — not only in all England, but in all the world."

" Ah! if I really thought that you meant what you said," exclaimed Ernestina; and then bending her countenance down till it touched his own as it lay pillowed upon her bosom, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses.

" Why should you mistrust my love for you, Ernestina? " asked the prince. " Have I ever done aught, either by word or deed, to make you think that I do not love you, that I do not entertain a delightful recollection of the joys I have experienced in your arms? And have I not this night convinced you by the reception I have sought to give you here that my feelings toward you are the same as ever? "

" Yes, my beloved prince," exclaimed Ernestina, " and I thank you, oh, I thank you most sincerely for this goodness on your part. Since last I saw you I have been very, very unhappy — "

" Yes, I have indeed felt for you," interrupted the prince, " for I could well understand the meaning of that terrible adventure on the bridge."

" Oh, and you do not think the worse of me for it? " she asked, in a soft, murmuring tone, with her head still bent down so that her warm cheek rested on the prince's brow.

" Think worse of you for it! " he exclaimed. " No, assuredly not. I suppose it all arose from the persecution you experienced at the hands of that ruffian Coffin? "

" Yes, it was he whom I meant to slay in the recess of Westminster Bridge," replied Ernestina. " But it was some other person whom I struck with the sharp dagger, and the image of the countenance upturned toward me at the moment has haunted me ever since. I instituted a secret inquiry in the neighbourhood and succeeded in learning that the young man was not killed by the blow, but was removed to a doctor's and subsequently recovered. That is all I know relative to the poor young man, for neither could I prosecute

my inquiries openly or fully, nor would the doctor's servants give much information upon the matter. There seemed altogether to be some mystery attendant upon the very presence of that young man in the recess — "

"Well, well," interrupted the prince, "we need not talk longer than is necessary on that painful topic. Suffice it for you to know that the young man did recover, and that therefore no weight need lie upon your conscience. Tell me, then, wherefore have you been absenting yourself from London? Why have you been living in that seclusion to which you refer in your letter in so mournful a strain? Are you afraid of continued persecutions from that villain? "

"Such is indeed my constant terror," replied Ernestina. "You know the monstrous proposition he made to me, and you are well aware that he is capable of backing any such proposal by the most dreadful threats. I am afraid of him, oh, I am afraid of him, and it was to implore your advice, even your intervention, in this matter that I resolved to present myself to you to-night."

"Most welcome are you, dear Ernestina. But tell me how I can serve you, what you wish me to do."

"My object is," she answered, "to be enabled to quit that rural solitude in which I have been burying myself, and return to London to take up my abode at my uncle's house. But this I dare not do, unless relieved from all apprehension on account of Daniel Coffin. For common decency's sake I ought still to be arrayed in widow's weeds."

"You look better as you are, dearest."

"Perhaps; but if I do settle again in London, I must resume my mourning apparel until the prescribed period for such weeds expires. If I allude to this subject of dress at all, it is only to show you that such is the terror in which I stand with regard to the public executioner that I dared not visit London save in a dress which serves as a disguise."

"But let us see what are the sources of all this terror," observed the prince, "so that I may better understand what I can do for you. In the first place, the scoundrel dares not breathe a word relative to the part which we induced him to play in smoothing the road of your husband out of this world, because, were he to tell all he knows of this circumstance, no one would believe him, not a soul would credit the assertion that I had lent myself to such a scheme."

"Be it as you say," returned Ernestina. "But then," she added, hesitatingly, "does he not know that I attempted the life of some one on the bridge that night? That he was there on the occasion I know, for I saw him, and from the little I succeeded in gleaning from the servants at the doctor's house, there was a man answering his description who helped to bear the wounded youth thither."

"Well, but has not the affair all blown over?" asked the prince, of course not choosing to reveal how much he had to do with that night's transaction. "Besides, how could Coffin possibly prove that you were the authoress of the deed? And even if he could, what earthly reason should he have for bringing before a court of justice an affair wherein he himself would have to give some curious explanations? Indeed, was he himself there for any good purpose, I wonder?"

"I admit that it is not reasonable to suppose that he would deliberately drag all these things to light," said Ernestina. "But nevertheless, I live in mortal terror of that man. When he threatens me in his own horrid manner, he excites me so dreadfully that I have not presence of mind to reason whether he will be likely to fulfil his threats or not, but I yield entirely to their influence. I cannot help it, for methinks at the time that in his rage or malignity he is quite capable of exposing everything, even though at the risk of compromising himself. In a word, I dare not, no, I dare not appear openly again in the world of London if that man remains at large with the power to thrust himself upon me, force his way into my presence, intimidate me with threats, or even perhaps make me the victim of brutal violence. This, then, is my position, and it drives me to despair. I thought of getting my uncle the marquis to negotiate with Coffin, so that for a given sum of money or an annual pension he should undertake to leave me free of molestation for evermore. But there is no reliance to be placed on the fellow's word, and indeed I should live in constant terror."

"Well, the position is too awkward, I must admit," said the prince, "and, to speak candidly, my dear Ernestina, I some time ago had the intention of packing the fellow off to the Colonies, or getting rid of him in some way or another. But all the startling events which have since occurred, Bonaparte's return to France, his preparations for war, and

his defeat the other day at Waterloo, all these matters have kept me in such a constant state of excitement that I really have altogether lost sight of that scoundrel Coffin until now."

"And now, therefore," exclaimed Ernestina, taking up the prince's last word, "you will carry your original intention out, will you not? Say, dearest prince, for my sake."

"Yes, anything for your sake, dear, dear Ernestina," he replied, winding his arms around her neck and straining her to his breast.

"Tell me, then, tell me what you will do," she murmured, "so that I may know upon what I may rely and judge how I may act. For, believe me, dearest prince, oh, believe me when I assure you that I can not, will not return into that rural solitude whence I have now emerged. On the contrary, if I thought that within a few days you would get rid of Coffin for me, — for that, in a word, is what I desire and the favour I came to ask of you, — I would return secretly to my uncle's house in Albemarle Street, and there remain until I learned from you that my enemy had been disposed of."

"Do so, do so, dearest Ernestina," rejoined the prince. "When we part presently, hie you home again to Leveson House, and within a few days, so soon as I can arrange some suitable plan, Coffin shall be packed out of the country. Then, the moment this is accomplished, I will come myself to Leveson House to acquaint you with what I have done, and perhaps, Ernestina, we may visit together those secret apartments."

"Yes, anywhere with you, dear George," replied the unprincipled woman, but as splendidly beautiful as she was dissolute; and as she spoke, she fixed upon the prince a look all burning with desire, while the expression of her countenance, flushing and glowing, was so full of wantonness that his own passions were now excited to a maddening degree.

Here, however, we may close our description of this interview, merely observing that it was midnight ere Lady Ernestina Dysart, once more enveloped in her light but ample cloak, and with the dark veil drawn down over her features, issued forth again from the private door of Carlton House.

Then did the prince regent return to the brilliantly lighted saloons where all the élite of the aristocracy and fashion

were gathered together, under the auspices of the magnificent Lady Sackville. It was one of a series of entertainments given to celebrate the Battle of Waterloo, the tidings of which tremendous victory had reached England three weeks previously. Alas! how little were the real consequences of that battle understood, or, rather, how much were they mistaken, by the immense majority of the British people!

However, not to pause for the purpose of political disquisition, let us proceed to remark that this was altogether the most brilliant festival which Lord and Lady Sackville had given since their installation at Carlton House. Of all the galaxy of loveliness, we must especially notice a group of beautiful girls gathered in one corner of the principal saloon, and whose bewitching charms when thus combined irresistibly conjured up the idea of a nosegay of the choicest and most exquisite flowers. Elegantly dressed, in a manner evincing the most refined taste and the best calculated to set off their respective styles of beauty each to the fullest advantage, they had likewise an air of virginal freshness and girlish artlessness about them which gave to this group an undefinable charm. To gaze upon those lovely creatures it would appear a pity indeed that they had ever been introduced into the heated atmosphere of a court life. The closest observer of human nature would not only have guaranteed the virtue of those damsels, but would have beheld in the innocence of their looks and the girlish gaieties of their manners the sign and pledge of their purity. They were not sisters, were not in any way related to each other, but were merely friends, linked, however, in the closest bond which intimacy can possibly weave, for a secret existed amongst them, a secret which was the common property of that sweet group, and which they would not for worlds reveal.

They were the daughters of some of the proudest families of the aristocracy. Two of them were engaged to be married to young noblemen of high rank, great wealth, and handsome persons, and the others felt equally certain of forming alliances quite as eligible. For their extreme beauty, their accomplishments, and their fascinations, as well as their exalted birth and the influence of the families to which they belonged, had already rendered them the objects of tender regard on the part of many suitors.

But if this charming bevy had now contrived to group itself apart from the rest of the brilliant company, and thus retire into a corner to exchange a few words with each other, it was only for a brief space, and in less than five minutes would they be sought for by the gallants who had engaged them as partners for the next dance.

But who were these charming creatures, forming the little group apart from the rest of the assemblage, this perfect nosegay of the sweetest flowers to which we have thus directed such special attention? These fair ones were the same who now and then secretly visited Carlton House, joined in a voluptuous dance for the amusement of the prince, and were in reality upon terms of the utmost familiarity with him. This was the secret which we have above alluded to as being common amongst them; it was the link binding them together in so close an intimacy. Their purity was gone, their chastity existed not. Lovely as they were to the eye, they were nought but pollution beneath the surface. That virginal air which seemed to invest them as with a charm was the mere artificial assumption of what was no longer natural. They were already on the highroad to become Messalinas of depravity.

And so it is with many, alas! too many, of the daughters of the aristocracy. Their very breeding, their rearing, their training gradually adapt them to all possible vices and hypocrisies. The routine of the fashionable boarding-school is a fitting preparative for the more prurient developments to be evoked by the warmth of the atmosphere of pleasure and fashion. How is it possible that girlish artlessness can survive in such a heated air as this? The freshness of the rose languishes and fades in the sickly atmosphere of drawing-rooms. So it is with the daughters of the aristocracy. We do not say with all, but with many, too many; and the virtuous ones prove the exceptions to the rule, and not the rule itself. How otherwise can we account for the fearful demoralization, the inveterate depravity, and the transcending dissoluteness which characterize the married life of the upper classes? The women of that sphere do not put on habits of profligacy at the same time with the bridal garments. No, before they even accompany their husbands to the matrimonial altar they have in many cases already strayed out of the paths of virtue. Hence is it that their progress in

vice continues with such an apparently easy and almost natural gradation down the inclined plane leading to utter dissoluteness.

Reader, this picture of the females of the aristocracy is not too highly coloured, no, nor a whit exaggerated. Ten thousand facts might be brought forward to testify its truth.

CHAPTER XL

WATCHINGS AND PURSUITS

Return we now to Valentine Malvern, whom we left in Pall Mall after he had despatched the ill-looking fellow to fetch Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

No sooner had he thus sent off the messenger whom hazard threw in his way when he began walking about in such a manner as to avoid exciting suspicion that he was in wait for anybody, but so that he could not fail to observe whomsoever might turn into the carriageway leading down to the private door of Carlton House. Not long had he thus waited when he beheld a lady advancing rapidly. She was closely veiled and wrapped in a cloak of light material and elegant make, and she at once turned toward the private door. A cold shudder passed through Malvern's frame as he thought to himself it was possible, nay, even probable, that this female who had just passed him by was either the murderess of his father, or was in some way connected with that sire's mystic disappearance.

Having waited for three or four minutes, so as to allow the lady full time to enter the palace, Valentine proceeded to examine the immediate vicinage of the private door with a close scrutiny, and having done so, he found that there was no other patl to reach it save the carriageway leading out of Pall Mall. It was therefore certain that by the same avenue the lady approached Carlton House must she come forth again, unless, indeed, the prince caused her to be escorted out by any other door, which was not at all likely, seeing that the circumstances of her visit indicated her desire that it should be as private as possible.

Having inspected the premises, as just stated, Malvern resumed his walk to and fro in that part of Pall Mall, and

as it was the place of resort for evening loungers in those times as well as at the present day, his prolonged presence there attracted no particular notice. Many and conflicting were the thoughts that passed through his mind: his interview with the prince, all that he had heard relative to his well-beloved Florence Eaton, then his meeting with Venetia, but chiefly of all, the singularity of that coincidence which on the very day that he had refreshed his memory, as it were, with an examination of the unknown lady's writing at Lawrence Sampson's should have thrown in his way another specimen of her penmanship at a time and in a place at which he should least have sought for it, — these were the varied topics of his reflections.

In about a quarter of an hour more Larry Sampson made his appearance, and at once accosting the young gentleman, he said, " Well, sir, what has happened? I presume accident has given you some clue."

" Yes, otherwise I should not have sent thus hurriedly for you," replied Valentine. " In a word, the whole affair now assumes a most delicate, and indeed difficult aspect."

" How so? " asked Sampson. " Tell me everything in a few words, because I have then got something to tell you, but not of any material consequences. And now proceed, sir."

" In a word, then, you must know," continued Valentine, " that I had occasion to call this evening, relative to certain business, upon his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I was shown to a private room, and there I found the fragment of a letter in the same handwriting as the one which I discovered amongst my father's papers and which is now in your possession. A portion of the letter, indeed that portion which would have contained the signature, was torn away. But all that remained did I read. The writer of that letter is on terms of great intimacy, I should say the fullest intimacy, with his Royal Highness. She says she is leading a retired life, which is perfectly miserable and which she can endure no longer. She makes an appointment to call upon his Royal Highness this evening at ten o'clock, in order to explain to him wherefore she has gone into seclusion, unless, indeed, as she says, he is already acquainted with the circumstances. Such is the substance of the letter. Accordingly, on issuing forth from Carlton House, I seized upon

the first person I saw likely to run upon a message and hurried him off to you."

"You did wisely, sir, in thus sending for me," observed Sampson. "But the lady?"

"I have every reason to believe she is at this moment in Carlton House," responded Valentine. "A few minutes after ten a lady of middle height, enveloped in a cloak, and with a veil entirely concealing her countenance, turned up this avenue here and passed on to the private door. That she is a lady so far as her station of life is concerned is beyond all doubt. Her gait, her walk, the tastefulness of her apparel, of which I could see enough by the lamplight as she passed me by, all prove that she is of quality and station, I am almost inclined to think of rank."

"And she is there now?" observed Sampson, inquiringly.

"She is there now," answered Malvern. "Since she is very intimate with the prince, and may have a long story to tell him, as well as a great deal to consult him about, it is probable her interview will be somewhat lengthy."

"Well, sir," remarked Sampson, "as you observe, the thing is altogether delicate and difficult, seeing that the lady, whoever she may be, is on such intimate terms with his Royal Highness. But we must endeavour to find out who she is, and then make inquiries as to her private life, her pursuits, and so forth. While this is being done, she must not be lost sight of, but shall be watched day and night, all her movements followed, every step dogged. This is the course to be adopted, and the only one."

"I agree with you fully," answered Malvern. "Of course it will be impossible to arrest the lady on such meagre evidence as we now possess —"

"Besides, after all," interrupted Sampson, "it does not necessarily follow that because she was engaged in an intrigue with your father, she must have made away with him, although what little we know relative to her true character is certainly calculated to produce no very favourable impression."

"Assuredly not," observed Malvern. "And I know not how to account for it, unless by the belief that this woman, if not the actual murderess of my sire, is at all events privy to the circumstances of his disappearance, but as she passed

me ere now, a cold shudder, like a feeling of superstitious awe, seized upon me."

"The imagination will do that, sir," observed Mr. Lawrence Sampson, coolly, for being a very matter-of-fact man, he had not much faith in such metaphysical evidences as that to which Valentine was alluding. Indeed, Larry considered one good, living, breathing witness in human shape to be worth all the secret presentiments, shudders, tremors, or quiverings in the world.

"You observed ere now that you had something to tell me," remarked Malvern.

"Yes," exclaimed Sampson, now recollecting the circumstance. "Do you, by any accident, happen to have a suspicion of who the man was that you sent with the message to bring me hither?"

"I have not an idea," said Malvern, surprised at the question, for the individual alluded to was a perfect stranger to him.

"That man," continued Larry, "is a notorious person in his way, and as desperate a character as ever lived. He has escaped from my clutches once, but I think that before long he will get himself into a scrape again, and next time I shall take very good care he does not escape."

"But to whom do you allude?" asked Valentine, with increased surprise.

"Ah! pardon me, sir, for inflicting my comments upon you," exclaimed Sampson. "That man whom you sent to me just now, and of whom we are speaking, is Daniel Coffin, the public executioner."

"Ah!" ejaculated Malvern, for even with a person of the strongest mind there may be something to shock or startle in such an announcement as this. "By the bye, I told him to come back and I would give him another guinea."

"Which he has taken very good care to do," observed Sampson. "He assured me he was to come back again to receive the extra fee. I offered to give it him, in order, as I said, to save him the trouble of retracing his steps, but really and truly to save you, sir, from being again brought in contact with such a fellow. But he said he was determined to come himself, as he thought it would be better."

"Where is he?" asked Malvern.

"There," returned Sampson, pointing across Pall Mall to a dark figure lounging to and fro on the other side.

"Go and give him the promised guinea," said Malvern, "and dismiss him at once."

Sampson accordingly traversed the street, and accosting the Hangman, put the money into his hand, saying, "There! I told you there would be no further need of your services. You can go your ways now."

"One word," said Coffin. "That's the Mr. Malvern whose father disappeared in such a queer way about a year ago, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Sampson. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, only just for curiosity's sake," returned Coffin. "Good night, Mr. Sampson," and he walked away.

But the Hangman did not really disappear from the scene. He saw that something was going on, and he was resolved to watch from a distance. Accordingly, after pretending to tramp away, he returned just so far as to be able to see everything without being seen, for not only was he impelled by a certain curiosity to penetrate into anything which appeared mysterious, but he likewise entertained so cordial a hatred for Larry Sampson that he would go many miles out of his way to do him an injury when it could be inflicted without fear of a rebound.

On rejoining Valentine Malvern, the Bow Street officer said, "I do not think it is necessary, sir, for you to remain here any longer. On the contrary, it is better that only one person should be seen loitering about here. You can accordingly return home, and I will remain upon the watch. I must get you first, however, to give me as accurate a description as you can of the lady's dress, so that I may not possibly make any mistake, and I must likewise ask you to have the goodness to take a hackney-coach and go around by the Bow Street watch-house, to deliver a little message for me."

Malvern at once gave the required description of the dress as well as he had been enabled to distinguish it by the uncertain light prevailing in the street at that hour, and he then intimated his readiness to convey any message Sampson might have to send to Bow Street.

"Be so kind, then, sir, to go to the watch-house there, and say that Mr. Sampson wants one of his men to be sent down to Pall Mall directly. Just please to hint that it's to

keep a lookout on a house that I want a man for, and they will arrange at the watch-house accordingly."

Malvern promised to deliver this message, and then observed that he should like to see Sampson again that night, to learn his success in tracing the lady to her abode, wherever it might be, and discovering who she was.

"I can well understand your anxiety, sir, in this respect," replied Sampson, "and if you will sit up for me I will be sure to call upon you, no matter at what hour, in order to report the result of the adventure."

Malvern then hurried away and having visited the watch-house in Bow Street to deliver Sampson's message, he proceeded straight home to his mansion in Hanover Square.

The Bow Street officer lounged about in Pall Mall, and in about twenty minutes a wretched-looking object, clothed in rags, and carrying a bundle of matches, came crawling along the pavement. But the moment he observed Sampson, signs of intelligence passed between them, quick as thought, and the wretched-looking mendicant, immediately crossing Pall Mall, threw himself down on a door-step opposite to where Sampson was walking about. For this seeming beggar was none other than one of the Bow Street officer's most active and intelligent men, and who had come down thus disguised in consequence of the message delivered by Valentine Malvern.

As the reader is already aware, it was nearly twelve o'clock before Lady Ernestina Dysart issued forth again from Carlton House. When she did thus emerge once more after her long and amorous interview with the prince regent, she had her veil drawn in thick folds over her countenance, and her cloak wrapped around her, so that it was impossible even for her own brother, had he been there at the time, to have recognized her. Neither did Larry Sampson, but he did at once know that it was the same whose dress Valentine had described to him, and he accordingly followed her at such a distance that, without approaching near enough to excite her attention, he never once lost her from his view as she passed through St. James's Square up into Piccadilly, and thence into Albemarle Street. Great now was the astonishment of Mr. Sampson when he perceived that she stopped and knocked at the door of the Marquis of Leveson's house. But perhaps never in all his

lifetime had his wonderment been excited to so high a pitch as it was when he obtained a glimpse of her countenance as she threw up her veil upon entering the hall. This glimpse he caught at the moment ere the porter closed the front door again, and by the powerful light which blazed inside the palatial mansion and streamed indeed through the open portals into the street did the Bow Street officer recognize the splendid countenance of Lady Ernestina Dysart.

The front door was closed again, and the flood of lustre which had poured forth was now only seen through the hall windows, but still the Bow Street officer stood on the opposite side of the way, transfixed, as it were, to the pavement, and with his looks riveted upon that portal which had just shut Lady Ernestina from his view. But from this reverie of astonishment he was speedily aroused by somebody brushing against him, and looking around, he beheld his underling who was disguised as a beggar.

"You know Lady Ernestina Dysart by sight?" said Lawrence Sampson to his man. "You saw her once at Newgate when she went to visit her husband. Keep a watch on her, follow her wherever she goes; it is of the utmost importance. You shall be relieved to-morrow morning about the usual time."

Larry then hastened away, and took the shortest cut to Hanover Square. Valentine Malvern was anxiously expecting him, and the moment the Bow Street officer was shown into his presence, he saw by his countenance that he had some important communication to make.

"Well, you have traced the lady to her dwelling?" exclaimed the young gentleman. "Where does she live, and who is she?"

"She lives at Leveson House," answered Larry Sampson, "and she is Lady Ernestina Dysart, the marquis's niece."

"Good heavens! what do you tell me?" exclaimed Malvern. "If this be the case, what are we to surmise? A perfect horror! — that she gave information against her own husband and sent him to the scaffold."

"Yes, that is positive beyond all doubt," rejoined Sampson, "and if she were capable of such an atrocity, it is by no means improbable that she has perpetrated even more flagrant enormities. But we can neither do nor say more at present. I must not only think over the matter seriously,

but likewise institute the most searching inquiries into her past life. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated the officer, as an idea struck him while turning to leave the room, "this accounts for her keeping the letter which I took her to Leveson House when making the inquiry on your account many months ago. It was her own letter, the anonymous one she had written to the magistrate, giving the information that placed her husband in the grasp of justice. I am afraid she is a bad one, a very, very bad one."

And with these words Mr. Lawrence Sampson took his departure, leaving Valentine Malvern to meditate upon the extraordinary discovery which had this night been brought about.

But in the meantime what had Daniel Coffin, the public executioner, been doing? From his hiding-place in Pall Mall he also had seen the veiled and cloaked lady issue forth from the avenue leading down to the private door of Carlton House, and he at once observed that she became the object of Lawrence Sampson's pursuit. The beggar, or, rather, the disguised officer, was also following at a distance, and Coffin having noticed the evident intelligence which existed between the two, had no difficulty in comprehending at once that this seeming mendicant was in reality an agent of the police. The Hangman had therefore a difficult course to steer, for he also had his own reasons for wishing to see what was going on, and he was equally anxious to escape observation. He accordingly proceeded in such a way as to keep the lady, Sampson, and the disguised beggar all three in sight at the same time, while he continued to remain unseen by all. In this manner was the vicinage of Albemarle Street reached, and as soon as the lady turned up that thoroughfare, the Hangman muttered to himself, "Ah! well, now I know who she is for a million, and, by Satan! it must be just as I thought. Young Malvern is after her; they have somehow or other got on the right scent — But what's the use of my standing chaffing with myself here? I must to business."

Meanwhile Lady Ernestina Dysart, having entered Leveson House in the manner already described, learned that her uncle the marquis was entertaining a select circle to celebrate the recent victory in Belgium, and as a matter of

course the domestics at once proposed to acquaint his lordship with Lady Ernestina's return. But she desired them not to do so. She was wearied; she, moreover, was not in mourning, and could not therefore be seen by any of her uncle's guests; and she was also anxious to pass the next few days in as much privacy as possible, for reasons already explained. She therefore bade one of the servants serve her up some supper in a retired parlour, and when she had partaken of refreshments, she hastened up to her bedchamber, which was always kept ready for her reception.

Upon entering this room, from which she had been absent for several months, she experienced a comfort and consolation such as one feels when meeting with old and familiar friends. Hastily dismissing the maid, with whose services she dispensed on the present occasion, for she wished to be alone so as to commune with her own thoughts, Lady Ernestina locked the door, laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and began to disapparel herself.

Standing before the glass, Ernestina let loose all the luxuriance of her light brown hair, which she began to comb out. The mirror reflected her exquisite form, about which the unfastened drapery now fell with a kind of classic air. Her splendid bust was exposed in all its dazzling whiteness and rich exuberance, and as her head was partially thrown back, while she combed out the long masses of her shining hair, her countenance caught the light of the wax tapers with a Rembrandt effect. On her cheeks there was a deepening of the carnation hue as she thought of the latter portion of her interview with his Royal Highness, and knowing that she was beautiful, aware, also, that she was admired, with true patrician profligacy did she feel a thrill of pride on account of being the paramour of royalty; so that while the glow gently suffused her cheeks, the light of satisfaction flashed from her fine dark eyes.

But heavens! all in an instant, while thus surveying herself in the mirror, she beheld another face, a hideous one, in horrible contrast with her own, and springing around with a fearful start and a suppressed shriek, she became paralyzed with horror on finding herself confronted by the terrible Hangman.

CHAPTER XLI

THE PUBLIC EXECUTIONER AND THE PATRICIAN LADY ONCE MORE

For nearly a minute did Daniel Coffin in silence survey, with devouring eyes and gloating looks, the splendid woman who thus stood before him in all the voluptuous undress of the hour and the occasion. The fellow, who, monster of ugliness though he were, was nevertheless insatiate in his desires and furious in his passions, felt the blood coursing like lightning through his veins, and he inwardly resolved to make that charming creature his own ere he was half an hour older, no matter what the consequences might be.

During the minute that he thus stood gazing upon her, Lady Ernestina herself was so stupefied with ineffable horror, so completely a prey to a fearful consternation, that she remained motionless and statue-like, not having even the thought to draw the loose drapery over the bosom on which the villain's eyes were fixed so gloatingly. But suddenly starting from that state of petrifaction, she sprang toward the bell-rope. Coffin, however, intercepted her more quickly still, and winding his arms around her half-undraped form, he strained her in his loathsome embrace, at the same time muttering the most awful threats if she dared cry out.

"For God's sake, release me!" said the wretched woman, scarcely able to articulate the words, for the reader may rest assured that it was not through the Hangman's menaces that she failed to give vent to rending shrieks and piercing screams, but simply because the direst horror had almost completely subdued every faculty.

"Release you! Yes, but only for a minute or so," said the Hangman, "that we may have a quiet chat and get

a little cool upon the matter, so as to understand each other better than we have ever done yet."

Thus speaking, he deposited the half-fainting lady upon a chair, and seating himself in another opposite to her, he again surveyed her with all the devouring intensity of one who feels assured of possessing the object of his desire, and experiences a delight in feasting his imagination with those joys the reality of which he is about to make his own.

"Why do you persecute me thus?" demanded Lady Ernestina, now rapidly recovering, if not exactly her presence of mind, at all events a dread consciousness of the horrors of her position, together with a keen appreciation of the necessity of doing something to avert the hideous catastrophe with which she was threatened. "Tell me, why do you pursue me thus? You must have watched me, you must have dogged me — Why, why do you do it?" and with nervous quickness did she cover her bosom and draw all her loosened raiment around her.

"When you come to hear all I have got to say," returned Coffin, "you will fall down on your knees and thank me for coming for'ard as a friend at a moment when you stand in such precious need of one."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried the lady, now starting with hysterical affright, for there was ever in her mind at least one subject to which all her terrors invariably pointed whenever raised up.

"I mean, my dear creature," answered the Hangman, with brutal familiarity, "that if you don't choose to accept me as a lover, it's deuced likely I shall have the unpleasant task of tucking you up at the Old Bailey."

Lady Ernestina gave a convulsive start, which more resembled the sudden writhing of anguish, as these words smote with awful ominousness upon her ears. She tried to speak, but could not. Her feelings choked her, her face was ghastly pale, her lips white as those of death, and quivering fearfully, while her eyes glared in dread consternation upon the public executioner.

"Come, come," he said, "there's nothing for you to be annoyed at, if so be you only keep good friends with me, for I can save you, and I will."

"Save me! Save me from what?" she gasped forth, now partially recovering the faculty of speech.

"Why, in plain terms," rejoined the Hangman, "you have been watched from Carlton House. There's young Malvern and Larry Sampson — "

"Ah!" gasped Lady Ernestina, and she sank back in her chair, not in a fit, not in a state of unconsciousness, but in a dismay so tremendous that she felt as if she were passing through the crucifying phases of a hideous dream, a dream too awful to be impressed with reality.

"Don't give way to despair," resumed the Hangman, "'cause why, there's plenty of time and means, too, to escape this danger. But shall I tell you all about it? Well, then, I suppose I had better," he continued, receiving no answer, but observing that the unhappy lady still gazed upon him in a sort of horrible stupor. "You see, I was coming along Pall Mall when a young genelman — a tall and good-looking fellow, too — stopped me just by that private avenue leading down to the convenient side-door of Carlton House, and thinking that I was some poor devil that would like to earn a guinea, — because, you see, it isn't my habit to dress overwell except on a Sunday, and then I come out spicy — well, but this young fellow bids me run and fetch down Larry Sampson, and he tells me that his name is Mr. Valentine Malvern. I thought this looked like an adventure in which I might have a finger, so when I had fetched Larry, I watched at a distance. Young Malvern went away, but soon after, Larry was joined by one of his runners, or agents, — whatever you choose to call them, — in the disguise of a beggar-man. So I was now more convinced than ever that there must be something queer in the wind, and I determined to see what it was. I therefore watched, and, lo and behold! presently out comes a lady cloaked and veiled from the private door of the palace."

"Ah! that was I," ejaculated Ernestina, with a sudden start, as the stupor of consternation quickly left her, and she now became fearfully interested in the tale which the Hangman was telling. "Go on, go on," she cried, trembling visibly from head to foot, and no longer perceiving in that man a hideous monster of whom she was afraid, she now looked upon him as one who held her very life in his hands and who had promised to save her.

"Well, ma'am," he continued, "you was so completely

wrapped up, and not being in mourning, too, that it never for an instant struck me who you was. So I followed you, because I saw Sampson and the disguised officer following also, but the moment I saw you turn up into Albemarle Street, it flashed to my mind like lightning who you was. I put two and two together, as one may say, all in a moment. For it struck me that as young Malvern's father had disappeared in such a rum way last year, it must have been him that I buried down at the Blackheath Villa."

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched Lady Ernestina, clasping her hands agonizingly.

"Don't take on like this, I tell you," said the Hangman, "but hear me out first, and then you shall decide what's to be done."

"But if I have been watched, if I am known," now half-shrieked forth the miserable lady, suddenly inspired with goading apprehensions of imminent danger, "I must fly, I must speed hence."

"Nonsense, I tell you. Sit quiet," exclaimed the Hangman, impatiently. "There's nothing to fear for the present, and if you will only listen to me."

"Well, well, go on, go on," said Lady Ernestina, in the tremor and flutter of a fearful excitement.

"You see, ma'am," continued Coffin, "it never had struck me before who the gentleman might have been that I buried down at Blackheath nearly a year ago, but just now the truth flashed to my mind like lightning. Why should young Malvern be watching you, and why should Sampson have a finger in the pie? I saw it all in a moment. So thought I, if so be Lady Ernestina only chooses to make herself amiable and agreeable to me, I'll help her out of this trouble. Thereupon I just cast an eye around about the house, and I saw that Larry Sampson was gone, but that the chap disguised as a beggar is keeping watch opposite."

"Heavens! then I am already a captive?" groaned Lady Ernestina, her bosom convulsing with an almost suffocating sigh.

"Oh, but there's more ways of getting out of a house than by the front door," rejoined the Hangman, with a grin, "or else I shouldn't have been able to have got in here at all. Howsomever, when I saw that Larry had gone and his chap

was watching opposite, I knew that nothing was to be done, at least for the rest of this night. Oh, I am up to all the dodges of them Bow Street fellows. I suppose they have got a clue to your ladyship somehow or another, but it isn't quite strong enough yet to warrant Larry to take you up, or else he's got others to consult."

"But do you believe it possible that the officers of justice would dare arrest me, the Marquis of Leveson's niece, the friend of the prince regent?" and as Lady Ernestina thus spoke, a look of mingled assurance and hauteur glowed upon her countenance.

"Arrest you, my dear creature!" cried the Hangman, with a sort of compassionate familiarity. "Larry Sampson would as soon arrest you as anybody else. Didn't he take your husband, without pity or remorse?"

"True!" murmured the lady, in a faint tone. "That dreadful Bow Street officer would arrest his own father or mother if what he calls his duty enjoined him. But what is to be done? What advice can you give me?" she asked, a sudden wildness displaying itself in her features.

"There's only one thing to do, and that is to escape," replied Daniel Coffin.

"Escape!" echoed the lady, starting from her chair. "Yes, let us escape at once."

"No, not at once," was the Hangman's quick response. "We must wait till the house is all quiet."

"How did you penetrate hither?" demanded Lady Ernestina, abruptly.

"By the back way," returned the Hangman. "There's an empty house a little higher up, and so I went quietly through that, and then crept along the yard walls till I got into the yard belonging to this house. Once there, it wasn't difficult for a genelman like me to insinuate himself inside," and thus speaking, Coffin displayed the small crowbar and bunch of skeleton keys which he almost invariably carried about in the capacious pocket of his greasy fustian coat.

"And you would have me escape by that same way?" cried Lady Ernestina, — "climbing over walls — "

"By Satan, ma'am! there's no other way for you," interrupted Coffin, "because Sampson's runner is keeping a close watch in the street, and, depend upon it, if you

attempt to leave by the front door, he will pounce upon you at once."

"Good heavens! what is to be done?" said Ernestina, wringing her hands. Then rising from her seat, she began pacing nervously to and fro. "I must see my uncle, I must tell him everything. Or stay, I will be off to the palace and crave the protection of the prince regent —"

"All the uncles and prince regents in the world," interjected the Hangman, in his coarse, rough voice, "will not prevent Larry Sampson from doing his duty. The best thing you can do, ma'am, is to escape with me in an hour or so, come to my house and stay quiet there till the next night, when you can get off to Dover, and so across to France."

"Yes, there is no alternative," moaned the wretched Ernestina; but then, as a withering, blighting reflection flashed through her brain, reminding her of the price which the Hangman, by the very gloating looks which he fixed upon her, was about to demand for his services, she reeled, staggered back against the couch, and would have fallen had she not clung to the bedposts for support. "No, no, no!" she murmured, with a convulsive shuddering, "anything sooner than that!"

"Oh, very good, ma'am," said the public executioner, perfectly understanding what was passing in her mind. "Then I see that my presence here is of no use, so I'll just take myself off, dropping a hint to the police-runner in the street that if he wants to prevent your ladyship from escaping he had better come in boldly and arrest you at once."

Thus speaking, Daniel Coffin moved toward the door, but Ernestina bounded after him and caught him by the arm, saying, in a thick, husky voice, "No, you will not precipitate my ruin."

"Come, now," resumed the Hangman, turning back from the door and fixing his eyes with devouring regards upon the trembling, agitated, almost sinking form of the lady who stood before him, the object of ineffable wretchedness, "let us have no more nonsense of any kind. Considering the past, you ought to be uncommon obliged to me for coming to do you a favour now, 'cause why, I haven't forgot the precious slippery trick you meant to play me on Westminster Bridge that night."

"Ah!" moaned Lady Ernestina, shuddering more convulsively and more visibly than before.

"Yes, you may well be sorry for that business, because it was a deuced bad piece of treachery on your part. No doubt you meant to stick that dagger into me."

"My God! what will become of me?" and with a suddued half-stifled shriek Lady Ernestina pressed her hands to her throbbing brows, for she felt as if her senses were abandoning her.

"An hour in your arms, and I will save you," said the Hangman, in the quick, hoarse voice of brutal passion.

"Never, never; I will die first," exclaimed Ernestina, in a wild tone, and she darted frantically toward the bell-rope.

But again did the public executioner anticipate the movement, again were his powerful rough arms flung around the beautiful patrician form, and as she felt the shriek which rose to her lips dying unuttered there, she gave a deep moan of despair, and her senses abandoned her.

When Lady Ernestina Dysart came to herself, she was lying upon the couch, and the Hangman was by her side.

For a few moments she could not believe her eyes, she could not credit the full horror of her thoughts. She pressed her hand to her brow, closed her eyelids tight, then opened them again, and by the light of the tapers burning on the toilet-table beheld the same hideous reality.

"Eternal God! is it possible?" she murmured, in accents so full of deep, concentrated, indescribable horror that such a state of feeling seemed to be the prelude to suicide, and again did she cover her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out the tremendous presence of the Hangman.

But we shall not linger upon this scene. We dare not, must not pause to describe the coarse brutality and ribald terms in which the public executioner gloated over his victim and made her conscious that all the crowning infamy of her shame had been consummated.

Spirit-broken, feeling herself twenty years older in mind, body, and awful experience than she was an hour back, the miserable, miserable Ernestina dragged herself from the couch, and sitting down upon a chair, she buried her face in her hands and gave way to the mingled horror and

anguish of her thoughts. She did not weep; she was even denied the solace of tears. Her eyeballs throbbed, and felt burning in their sockets, as if indeed living cinders, red-hot, were there. Excruciating fires were also glowing in her brain, and yet her limbs were cold as ice. She felt as if she were dying, as if all the chords which bound her to existence were giving way, as if life were gradually parting from her.

For three or four minutes did she thus remain rocking herself gently to and fro, as she sat with her elbows resting on her knees and her face buried in her hands. A few low moans bespoke the awful anguish which filled her heart well-nigh to bursting. At length she was startled from this awful reverie by a voice which sounded like that of doom upon her ears.

"Come now, don't take on like this."

"Enough! leave me!" ejaculated Ernestina, and suddenly springing up from her seat, she revealed her frightfully pallid, indeed ghastly, countenance to the Hangman, while with the right arm extended she pointed toward the door.

"But you can't escape without me," he observed, though in a hesitating manner, for he was actually frightened at the awful appearance which the outraged woman now presented to his view.

"Escape!" she ejaculated, her lips writhing with ineffable scorn, and at the same time her eyes flashed the lurid light of most hateful defiance. "Sooner the scaffold than escape with thee. Begone!" and with the wildness of a maniac did she continue pointing toward the door.

"I can't and I won't leave you in this scrape," said the Hangman, doggedly. "You must come."

"Ay, to be made your mistress!" cried Ernestina, with the intensest, most malignant, most concentrated bitterness alike of voice and manner, "to be dragged through the mire of all conceivable as well as all inconceivable pollutions, to be besmeared and bespattered with all the filth and feculence of the hideous morass in which you and all your reptile-equals swarm in pestilential existence! No, by Heaven, rather the felon's gaol at once, the condemned cell, and all the hideous paraphernalia of the scaffold. What, go away with you? Place myself still more deeply in your power than

I already am? No, no, ten thousand times no! Sooner the lazar-house or the lunatic asylum. And now begone! I command you to be begone!"

While thus she spoke, her eyes appeared to burn with a living fire, and a fearful expression of mingled hatred and resoluteness was upon her distorting features, so that the Hangman quailed in the presence of that incensed, outraged woman who seemed to have lost all the weakness of her sex and to be animated with the spirit of an avenging fiend.

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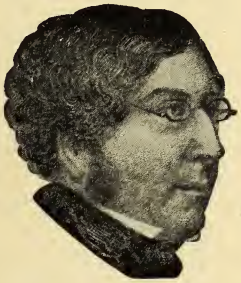

Privately Printed
For Members of
The Oxford Society
London Boston

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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE SEQUEL

The command of Lady Ernestina was peremptory enough for the Hangman to take his departure, but still he moved not. That is to say, though he quailed and even grew afraid in her presence, for there was something terrible in her wrath, yet he did not issue from the room. A sort of unknown fascination kept him there. He felt as if circumstances had now so mixed up her fortunes with his own that he must not abandon her. Or perhaps, in his own savage, brutal style, he entertained a fancy — we dare not use the word affection — for that splendid patrician creature of whose person he had ere now possessed himself. But whatever the feeling were, certain it is that he lingered in her presence, unable to leave, yet not knowing how to propitiate her.

"Do you hear what I have said, and do you mean to obey?" she asked, the words hissing with subdued rage between the portals of those lips which had so recently been polluted by the hot kisses of the ruffian who stood before her.

"The plain truth of it is, ma'am," he answered, "I will not leave you. I don't want to have the hanging of such a beautiful creature as you are. You are too handsome to die on the gibbet. My arm has been around your neck, and I should not like to have to put a rope there. Understand me, then. If you stop you will be hanged; your only safety

is in flight. Remember, hanging is an awful death — I've seen plenty of it, and should know."

Let the reader conceive what would be his sensation if, for instance, on getting out of bed in the dark, he stepped with his bare foot upon a huge snake coiled up in cold, clammy, loathsome folds upon the floor. But if on leaping forward to escape from that snake, another reptile was trodden upon, and then another and another, encountering the bare feet in quick succession, while the individual, in frenzied horror, was flying toward the door, would not the sensations thus experienced be the realization on earth of some of the most poignant pains characteristic of Satan's kingdom? But not more horrible could such sensations be than those which Lady Ernestina felt crowding one upon another as the Hangman addressed her in that speech every sentence of which smote her like a fresh outrage or seized upon her like a new anguish. She writhed, oh, she writhed convulsively, and it was a strong and awful writhing, too, that thus pierced through her graceful, elegant, and voluptuous form. The same effect was visible upon her features, and as the Hangman spoke of her neck which he had encircled with his arm, and which he would willingly save from the contact of a halter, she bit her lip almost till the blood came in order to prevent herself from shrieking out, while the whole aspect of her countenance at that instant showed that a scream was passing behind it.

But all in a moment, when the Hangman had done speaking, a change came over her. It was a change so complete and so abrupt that it could only have arisen from the quick flashing of some new thought to her mind, prompting a change in her plans all in an instant.

"You are sincere in wishing to serve me?" she said, in a cold, almost freezing tone.

"I am — on my soul I am," answered the Hangman, speaking with perhaps more genuine sincerity than ever he had shown in all his life before.

"And you will assist me to escape?"

"Don't I keep on recommending it as much as I can?"

"But I will not issue forth by the route you have proposed," said Ernestina, in a tone of decision. "I cannot go climbing over walls from yard to yard."

" Then perhaps you know a better way? " rejoined the Hangman, inquiringly.

" Yes, there is another means of issue from this house," said Ernestina.

" Well, so much the better. Any way will do if it don't lead into Albemarle Street, where the runner is watching. Come, there is no time to lose."

" It is through the secret apartments that we must proceed," remarked Lady Ernestina, " and thither must we repair with the utmost caution. But it is now two o'clock in the morning. The guests are gone, the house is quiet. One minute, and I shall be prepared to take my departure."

With these words, Lady Ernestina proceeded to arrange her dress, and also to put up the shining masses of her hair. She then resumed her cloak and bonnet, and having listened for a few moments on the landing to convince herself that everything was quiet in the house, she returned to the toilet-table, took up a wax taper in her hand, and beckoning to the Hangman, said, " Now come."

Noiselessly did they descend the stairs, and on the landing below, Lady Ernestina opened the door leading into the bedroom communicating with the dressing-room whence there was a secret entrance into the private apartments. Traversing this bedchamber, — the same which Ariadne Varian had occupied, — Ernestina conducted the Hangman into the room containing the mechanical chairs. This place the fellow knew well, for twice before had he been in these apartments, — once when he was found captive in the chair by Lady Ernestina and the prince, and the other time when employed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon to aid his scheme in rescuing Venetia from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson.

" Everything is just the same as when I last saw it," observed Coffin, as on following Ernestina into this room with the mechanical chairs he swept his eyes around. " But which way is it now, my beauty, that we are to go? I hope through the gallery yonder, because I think the mere look of some of the pictures and statues there would make you love even your humble servant, Dan'el Coffin."

" Silence! — no jesting! " cried Lady Ernestina. " There! pass on that way. I follow you."

She did indeed point to the gallery, and Coffin unhesi-

tatingly proceeded toward the door opening into the museum of artistic indelicacies and exquisite immoralities. But just at the very moment that the Hangman was passing by one of the mechanical chairs, Lady Ernestina, dropping the taper, threw herself suddenly upon him, and with one almost superhuman effort flung him, as it were, into the chair. The sharp clicking noise was heard of the mechanism giving way, and as a terrible imprecation burst from the ruffian's lips, he was caught fast by the arms and shoulders, thus being rendered a captive and powerless all in a moment.

The taper was extinguished, the room had been plunged into pitchy darkness, but Ernestina's laugh of irony and triumph fell like that of a mocking fiend upon the Hangman's ears.

"Come, now," he growled, savagely, "what's the use of such a scurvy trick as this?"

"The use of it is," responded the lady, in low but measured accents fraught with all the concentration of a fearful vengeance, "to punish you as you deserve for the diabolical outrage you have perpetrated upon me this night. Miscreant, monster that you are! I could have endured, I could even have forgiven, everything but that. The very fountains of my existence are now poisoned at their source, the springs of my life are envenomed and corrupted. You have made me feel what it is to be utterly polluted. I am now loathsome to myself; I feel that I have become a mass of moral rottenness. I do not want to live, I cannot live. But ere I die my vengeance must be wreaked upon you, a bitter, burning, implacable vengeance, such as can only come from a heart fed with the fires of hell. Such a vengeance is this which I am inflicting upon you. For here will you remain to starve, to perish with hunger, with thirst, and in the exhaustion of frenzied and unavailing efforts to release yourself from that captivity."

"Devil of a woman that you are! I hate you now," exclaimed Coffin, gnashing his teeth with rage, "as much as I have been loving you."

"Oh, pollute not the sacred name of love by breathing it from your toadlike lips!" exclaimed Ernestina, her voice thrilling as if full well calculated to pierce the brain and to bear upon its breath the blight of a withering curse. "Here will you linger for a brief space, enduring all the horrors of

starvation, suffering the most torturing cramps in every limb through being retained in one fixed position, and when in your last agonies you implore Heaven to send some one to your succour and your prayer remains unheard, then think of the burning coals of torture which you have this night heaped upon the head of Ernestina Dysart."

There was something awful in this foreshadowing of a terrific doom, something appalling to a degree in that avenging voice speaking through the utter darkness which enveloped the man, and speaking likewise such terrible things. The Hangman was struck with dismay. Were a light there, he would have been seen sitting aghast, his countenance turned in the direction whence Ernestina's voice appeared to come.

"Miscreant that you are!" she resumed, "I could if I chose gloat my eyes with your dying agonies at once. I might procure a dagger or a knife, and thrust it deep down into that black heart of yours. But no, that would be putting you too quickly out of misery. I prefer to leave you to the endurance of all those slow tortures and lingering agonies which I have described, thirst that shall be maddening, hunger that shall make you frenzied and wild."

"Fiend, devil, demoness!" exclaimed Daniel Coffin, "your hatred and malignity make you insensate. How can all this happen in a house filled with people? Think you that I shall not be able to make myself heard?"

"Know you not," asked Ernestina, in a scornful tone, "that these walls beat back every sound which strikes against them? Nothing can penetrate. Oh, scream, roar, yell, howl, and cry, give vent to all the fury of your rage in the voice of a hyena, or to your savage ferocity in the tones of a tiger, but 'twill have no more effect than a child's whisper in calling succour to your aid."

"Think you, then, that I will not tear away this chair from the floor, or smash this mechanism which now holds me tight?" and as the Hangman thus spoke in a deep, hoarse tone, he strove with a tremendous effort to break the bonds of his captivity.

"Ah! have you succeeded?" said Ernestina, in a mocking tone. "No, toss, writhe, struggle, rage, and convulse as you will, there must you remain. And now, good night for ever."

"Murderess, you will yet swing upon the scaffold!" shouted the Hangman, in a terrible voice.

But Ernestina gave him no answer, and the next moment he heard the secret door in the wall quickly close, and then all was still. The miscreant was alone, and imprisoned as he was, enveloped, too, in the deep darkness, he began to shudder lest the avenging lady had indeed prognosticated his doom but too truly.

We must, however, follow the steps of Lady Ernestina Dysart. Having issued forth from the secret chamber, she did not ascend again into her own bedroom, but proceeding down-stairs she noiselessly opened the front door, and drawing down her veil, quitted the house. The heaven was still quite dark, but the street-lamps at once showed her a tatterdemalion form walking to and fro on the opposite side of the way. The instant, however, Lady Ernestina sallied forth, the disguised officer turned and stood still for a moment, but he was about to resume his lounging, shuffling walk again, ere following her at a distance, when to his surprise Lady Ernestina crossed over to him and said, in a firm voice, "I know who you are, I know what you are here for. I am going to Hanover Square. Follow me if you like."

The officer was certainly taken aback for a moment; but instantaneously recovering himself, he affected not to be able to comprehend what her ladyship meant. Not knowing what her object could possibly be, he fancied that this proceeding on her part was a portion of some stratagem, and therefore resolved to act in a way which should give her no opportunity of entrapping him into any revelation or admission that she might be seeking to elicit.

But having addressed him in that manner, Lady Ernestina said no more; and instantaneously turning away, she hurried into Bond Street, and thence by the nearest cut to Hanover Square. Not once did she look behind until she reached the house with No. 20 on the front door, and then, having knocked and rung, she gazed about her. At just a sufficient distance to enable her to distinguish the object by the lamps, but too far off for her to descry its aspect, she beheld a human form, and she felt persuaded that it was the disguised officer who had followed her.

Several minutes elapsed ere any answer was given to her

summons, but at length a servant, having evidently huddled on some clothing in great haste, made his appearance.

"Is Mr. Valentine Malvern at home?" asked Lady Ernestina, still keeping the veil over her countenance.

"Yes, he is, ma'am," replied the footman, hesitatingly, for he saw enough of the visitant to be assured that she was of ladylike aspect so far as her apparel was concerned. "But at this hour —"

"I am well aware of the strangeness and seeming impropriety of this visit at such an hour," Lady Ernestina hastened to observe. "But it is absolutely necessary I should see Mr. Malvern at once. Tell him," she added, in a less decisive tone, "that it is respecting the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson this evening, or, rather, during the earlier part of the night which is now passing."

"Walk in, ma'am," said the domestic, who, without understanding anything about the business to which Ernestina had alluded, nevertheless saw that her presence there referred to some matter of importance.

He accordingly conducted Lady Dysart into a parlour, where he lighted the candles; and as he quitted the room to report her presence to his master, the very first object on which her eyes settled, as she looked around, was a portrait of the late Sir Archibald Malvern. It had been taken only a few months previous to his death, and was what is usually termed a "speaking likeness." Ernestina felt herself shaken by powerful emotions, for she had loved that man tenderly and well, although with an illicit affection. Yes, and she shuddered, too, with a strong trembling, as all the circumstances of the fearful tragedy which cost him his life were brought vividly back to her memory. Then she fell into a profound reverie, from which she was somewhat abruptly startled in about ten minutes by the entrance of Valentine Malvern.

The young gentleman had not sought his couch when the servant knocked at his door with the intimation that a lady, who had given no name, demanded an immediate interview. He had retired to his chamber, it is true, but only to pace to and fro, in an uneasy and anxious mood, or else throw himself in an armchair and give way to his reflections. When the servant brought that message, a presentiment struck him at the moment that it was Lady Ernestina Dysart

who had come to him. She was not only uppermost in his thoughts, but she of all women could alone have any reason to seek an interview with him at such an hour, in so urgent a manner, and relative to the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson. He did not, however, immediately descend; he had to wait a few minutes to collect his thoughts and make up his mind with what demeanour he should appear in the presence of the woman whom he believed to be the murderess of his father.

Cold and reserved, with a mournful look and slow measured pace, did Valentine advance into that room to which Ernestina had been shown. He was well acquainted with her; he had often met her in society, at the time, too, when she was carrying on that intrigue with his father which he had so little suspected. He therefore now at once recognized her, as she raised her veil on his appearance, and that she had come upon the business which was uppermost in his thoughts, indeed, upon the only business on which she could possibly visit him at all at such an hour, he immediately perceived by the fixed pallor and altered, care-worn look that she wore. For it was a look of that nature which showed that it had only been recently stamped upon the countenance, as if by the effect of some evil intelligence made known within only a few hours past.

"You know wherefore I am here?" said Lady Ernestina, at once addressing Valentine in a tone which, though slightly tremulous, indicated a mind made up for even the most painful ordeal. "But in the name of God, do not believe anything downright outrageous against me. Culpable, very culpable I was, but only as so many women often are."

"In one word, tell me, Lady Ernestina, is my father dead?" asked Malvern, hurriedly.

"O heavens, yes!" she answered, bursting into tears; ay, and it was an unfeigned fit of weeping in which the pent-up feelings of the last two hours now found vent.

"He is dead! Oh, how could I have hoped otherwise?" and Valentine, averting his countenance, wept; but suddenly turning toward Ernestina, he clutched her by the arm in a paroxysm of uncontrollable feeling, saying, "Tell me how he came by his death."

"In the endeavour to save my honour," replied Ernestina,

now all in a moment wiping away her tears, and speaking with a deep solemnity of voice.

" And — and — you — you did not — "

But young Malvern could not, dared not even, finish the sentence, for he at once saw by the sudden glow which appeared on Ernestina's cheek, the instant before so pale, by the fire flashing from out her large dark eyes, and by the haughty wreathing of her upper lip, how indignantly she resented, depraved though she were, the terrible suspicion implied rather by the look which he had cast upon her than by the few broken words to which he had hesitatingly given utterance.

" Good God! have you indeed suspected me of this? " she exclaimed. " But I forgive you, yes, Heaven knows that I forgive you; for, after all, it is to me that you owe the loss of a father. But to suspect me — ah! I who loved him so well, so fondly, and was beloved so tenderly by him in return! " and as she spoke, the tears again flowed in a blinding torrent from her eyes.

" Lady Ernestina, 'tis for me to demand pardon of you," said the young man, deeply moved, " if by my suspicions I have injured you."

" Oh, do not for another moment let even your thoughts linger upon such dreadful suspicions," she exclaimed. Then, once more wiping her eyes with nervous haste, she took Valentine's hand, led him toward the portrait of the late Sir Archibald, and gazing up toward those eloquent features which seemed to look, to breathe, to speak, and even to smile from the canvas, she said, " Now, in the presence of that lifelike counterpart of him whom I loved so well and who is gone, and also before that high attesting Heaven which hears me speak, I swear that I am innocent of foul deed or treacherous play toward your father."

" It is enough, Lady Ernestina Dysart, I believe you, I am satisfied," and Valentine's looks bore evidence to the sincerity with which he made these announcements. " Pardon, however, the curiosity which prompts me at once to beseech a full and complete recital of the circumstances of my father's death."

" Oh, it is to fulfil this duty that I am come hither now," and with these words Ernestina proceeded to place herself in a chair so situated that while she was speaking she could

still gaze up at the portrait hanging to the wall, as if to prove that she did not fear thus to vindicate herself in the presence of that image of the dead one.

Valentine seated himself near her, and the reader may suppose with what profound attention and all-absorbing interest he listened as Lady Ernestina Dysart detailed the particulars of Sir Archibald's death, — how he had concealed himself in the bath, where suffocation had deprived him of life.

" Oh, Sir Valentine," exclaimed Lady Dysart, breaking off in the midst of her narrative, " I do not ask you as a son to pass a comment upon your sire's conduct, but as a man must you experience the loftiest admiration for that noble generosity, that chivalrous magnanimity which kept him silent, placing a seal upon his lips even when feeling the agonies of death gaining upon him. For you understand, Sir Valentine, that it must have been while the boxes and trunks were heaped upon the lid of the bath that the mortal warnings of asphyxia fastened vulture-like upon your sire, and he knew that if he gave vent to even the slightest moan he would betray me to a furious husband. He died, therefore, died to save my honour — O God! how I loved him! "

There was a long pause, during which Valentine Malvern sat weeping. Ernestina shed no more tears. Her eyes were hot and dry, her throat was parched, her thoughts were harrowing to a degree, for she reflected that she who had once been worthy of that illimitable love and transcendent devotion on the part of the handsome and high-minded Archibald Malvern was now a polluted wretch, loathsome to herself, and still reeking from the embraces of the public executioner. Oh, she felt that whatever frailties she had been guilty of, whatever crimes she had committed, her punishment had already taken place on earth and had been consummated that night.

After the long pause above noticed, she resumed her narrative, describing how her husband returned from France on a private and hurried visit to England, and how he discovered the corpse at the villa, recognizing its features.

" I need not tell you," she continued, " that on rejoining me in France, he covered me with reproaches. I merited them. But then he brought me to England, and proposed to me dreadful things as the only condition on which he

would help to consign the unfortunate tragedy to oblivion. Upon all this I cannot bear to dwell. Suffice it to say that in a grave dug deep in the garden belonging to that villa do the remains of your father lie, and with him is interred the silken ladder by the aid of which he ascended to my window. Oh, Sir Valentine, if you knew all, you would indeed acknowledge that I have been horribly punished."

"Unless I believe you to be a veritable fiend in human shape," observed the young baronet, in a solemn voice, "I must suppose that the wrongs you experienced at your husband's hands were of no ordinary character, for the proof exists that you were the means of surrendering him up to the hands of justice."

"Ah! the anonymous letter has betrayed that circumstance," exclaimed Ernestina. Then speaking quickly, she added, "But of all the deeds which stain my life, the conduct I pursued toward my husband is the one calculated to inspire the least remorse. It was a woman's vengeance, and though you will say that the vengeance was terrible, yet was the provocation of no common character."

"Lady Ernestina," said Malvern, solemnly, "I am not your judge, and have neither right nor pretence to hold you accountable for actions which concern not myself. Of your behaviour toward your husband we will therefore speak no more. But in this deplorable tragedy involving my father's fate, what course is to be pursued?"

"For my part," at once returned Lady Dysart, in a firm voice, "I have resolved not merely to tell everything, but likewise to dare all consequences."

"How learned you that suspicions had arisen against you?" asked Malvern.

"I saw that I was watched to-night," replied Lady Ernestina, not choosing to enter into any explanations that should compel her to speak of the Hangman or show that she had any connection with him. "My fears were excited. I cannot exactly say that conscience troubled me, since whatever share I might have had in your father's fate was unintentional on my part."

"I believe the explanations you have given me upon that head," rejoined Malvern, "and I can assure you that for more reasons than one I do not wish to give an unnecessary publicity to these details connected with my father's fate.

In the first place, I entertain no vindictive feeling toward your ladyship, and I should therefore be sorry to cause an exposure which would produce dishonour or danger of any kind to you. In the second place, I am in duty bound to do all I can to shield my beloved father's memory from reproach, and hence I can have no wish to drag to light an unfortunate amour which would stamp him as the seducer of a friend's wife. Under all these circumstances the matter must be hushed up as far as possible, and we will consult Mr. Sampson upon the subject."

"Be it so," rejoined Ernestina, still speaking with firmness and decision. "Even if he should insist on introducing the whole transaction to the cognizance of the tribunals, I am prepared to undergo whatever punishment may be awarded to me."

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the young gentleman, "I have already declared my belief in the truth of your tale, but as a duty toward the memory of my deceased parent, I shall assure myself by means of a surgical examination that circumstances support your statement, and if so, the tribunals would award you but a slight punishment for concealing the death, even if Mr. Sampson should insist upon dragging the transaction before them. But he will not, I am convinced that he will not," added Sir Valentine, emphatically.

He now looked at his watch, and found that it was nearly four o'clock in the morning.

"I would suggest," he continued, "that we should repair at once to Mr. Sampson's and hear his opinion, but I fear to overtax your energies, for you look ill, you seem as if you had been up all night."

"Let us go to Mr. Sampson's at once," said Ernestina, rising from her seat and drawing her veil over her countenance.

"Be it so," rejoined Malvern, and they issued forth together.

CHAPTER II

THE DISINTERMENT

It was between seven and eight o'clock on that same morning, when a hackney-coach drove up to the gate of the villa in the neighbourhood of Blackheath. It was still untenanted, never having been let since occupied by the Dysarts, but Mr. Sampson, who rode upon the box with the coachman, had obtained the key from the neighbouring house-agent who had the letting of it, under pretence of showing it to some friends in want of a residence in that quarter. The house-agent, happening to be a friend of Sampson's, was easily deterred by some excuse from either accompanying him and his party or sending anybody to show them over the premises.

When the hackney-coach stopped at the gate, Larry Sampson alighted from the box, while Sir Valentine Malvern and two medical gentlemen descended from the interior. The young baronet then assisted Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight, and when Sampson had ordered the hackney-coach to return in three or four hours, the party entered the grounds belonging to the villa. On repairing to the back garden, they found two men with pickaxes, spades, and the necessary implements for opening the grave, these men having been sent over by Sampson, with instructions to climb the wall and wait in the grounds for the arrival of himself and companions.

Sir Valentine Malvern and Lady Ernestina walked first, the medical men and Sampson following at a short distance. Malvern, with the chivalrous feeling of a gentleman toward a lady placed in most painful circumstances, offered Ernestina his arm, but she, with becoming taste, declined the courtesy. She felt how embarrassing it would be for

that young man to show an act of friendship toward the woman who, though unintentionally, had been the cause of his sire's premature death.

It was nevertheless with faltering steps that Ernestina advanced toward the spot where she knew the grave to be. She was well-nigh exhausted in mind and body, having been up all night, and having passed through so many phases of excitement. Indeed, she was only now sustained by that species of unnatural energy which arms a person when resolved to carry out a particular proceeding to the end.

Having lived for some time at the villa, she was of course familiar with every spot, and she could not fail to recollect to a nicety where the grave had been hollowed into which she had seen her dead paramour consigned. It is true that all traces of the interment had been completely effaced, but Ernestina was enabled to point to the place where the men were now to dig. They accordingly went to work, one of the medical men remaining as a witness of the proceeding, while Sir Valentine repaired with Ernestina, the other medical gentleman, and Lawrence Sampson into the villa.

Audible was the fluttering of the lady's heart as she crossed the threshold of the house where the tragedy had taken place. Be it remembered that the establishment was let to the Dysarts ready furnished, but we must here observe that in consequence of remaining untenanted for some months, the owner had sold off all the furniture, and it was now empty. The bath was, however, a fixture in the room specially appropriated for the purpose, and there was it found by the party now penetrating to that chamber.

No tears fell from Ernestina's eyes as she gazed upon it. Her eyeballs were throbbing and burning as when she left Malvern's abode in Hanover Square. A convulsive gasp, however, rose up into her throat, and she was compelled to lean against the wall to sustain herself. As for Sir Valentine, he was of course much affected on finding himself in the room where his father had breathed his last, and on beholding that bath in which the catastrophe took place.

Having remained in the chamber for a few minutes, the party descended to the garden again, and Ernestina, retiring to a short distance from the grave, seated herself in an arbour, there to wait the result of the proceedings that were taking place. The other members of the party, who had

been with her to the bathroom, gathered around the grave, and in a short time a considerable hollow was dug by the workmen. These men now prosecuted their labours with all befitting caution, so as not to strike their implements into the corpse, which they reached in due course. It was enveloped in a sheet, and the rope ladder of silken cords was found inside the grave. Thus every detail was precisely as Lady Ernestina had described it, and the dead body was borne into the house.

We shall not endeavour to probe the feelings with which Sir Valentine Malvern gazed upon the decomposing remains of the author of his being. Suffice it to say that he experienced all the grief which an affectionate son was sure to testify on such a solemn as well as sorrowful occasion. He then retired with Larry Sampson, leaving the medical men to perform their examination with a view to ascertain whether the deceased had experienced foul play otherwise than as Lady Ernestina described.

"And so, Mr. Sampson," said Valentine, while walking with the officer through the garden, "you feel that should the surgical report be satisfactory, you will be justified in allowing the matter to be hushed up?"

"Assuredly," answered Sampson. "In consequence of the various representations you have made to me, and with the justness of which I fully concur, I should consider myself to be acting officiously, instead of officially, in giving publicity to this unfortunate series of events."

"I thank you most sincerely for adopting so considerate and kind a course," said Valentine. Then, after a brief pause, he added, "Lady Ernestina is to a great extent to be pitied. She evidently loved my poor father dearly."

"But her conduct toward her husband," observed Larry, "was certainly of the most monstrous description, and when you say that she is to be pitied, I suppose you mean in reference to the sad transactions which we are now investigating, and not in respect to any other matter?"

"Lady Ernestina emphatically stated to me," rejoined Malvern, "that the provocation she had received from her husband was immense, and she as plainly and unreservedly confessed that hers was a woman's vengeance."

"There can be no doubt that Dysart was a man of depraved habits, heartless disposition, and unprincipled

character," observed Sampson. "However, with all that we have now nothing to do; and if the report of the medical men be such as to bear out her ladyship's statement respecting your father's death, I shall at once tell her that she may consider herself at large again. Hitherto all the circumstances of our investigation corroborate her tale. There is the bath, evidently convenient enough for a surprised lover to conceal himself in; and if we only fancy the lid closely pressed down, with boxes heaped upon it, it is not astonishing that suffocation should have ensued. Then, too, there is the ladder of silken cords, exhumed with the deceased, and serving as additional testimony to corroborate Lady Ernestina's statements."

In this manner did the Bow Street officer and Sir Valentine Malvern continue to discourse while walking to and fro in the garden. Presently one of the medical men was seen advancing from the villa, and Lady Ernestina, on perceiving him, at once concluded that the examination was over. She accordingly issued from the arbour and proceeded to join the group. Her countenance was still deadly pale and bore the traces of much internal struggling and overwrought feeling, as well as great physical depression, but at the same time her demeanour was collected and firm as if she had no fear for the result of the surgical scrutiny.

The medical man had joined Sir Valentine Malvern and Larry Sampson before Ernestina came up with them, but when he observed that she was advancing, he waited until she was present, so that she might listen to the report he had to make. He then declared in a solemn manner that from the examination which himself and his professional companion had made in respect to the deceased, there was not the slightest ground for questioning the truth of Lady Ernestina's story.

"In that case," said the officer, at once addressing himself to Ernestina, "your ladyship need not consider that I assert any further claim to your presence here."

"Your ladyship," Sir Valentine Malvern hastened to add, "may take the hackney-coach and return at once to London. I and the others must remain here for a short time in order to adopt measures for the removal of my deceased father's remains in as private a manner as possible from the neighbourhood."

To be brief, Lady Ernestina Dysart took her departure in the hackney-coach; and on her way back to Albemarle Street she congratulated herself upon her presence of mind in adopting the course which she had pursued toward Malvern and which had resulted in her extrication from a most serious dilemma.

But we must still retain the reader's attention at the villa. So soon as Sir Valentine had handed Lady Ernestina into the hackney-coach, he hastened back to rejoin Sampson and the medical man, whom he had left conversing together in the garden. He now found them with the other professional gentleman, and this latter, at once accosting the young baronet, handed him a small pocketbook, which felt damp to the touch.

"Before you offer a word of explanation," said Malvern, in a solemn tone, "I feel assured that you have found this about the person of my deceased father. And yet I recognize it not. I do not remember to have observed it in his possession."

"I have just found it," said the medical gentleman, "in a secret pocket in the breast of the deceased's coat. While left alone by my colleague just now, I happened to tread upon the coat, which we had previously taken off, and which lay upon the floor where we performed the examination. Feeling something thicker under the foot than the mere cloth of the coat could be, I had the curiosity to ascertain what it was, and, as I have already explained, in a private pocket I discovered this article. All the other pockets had been rifled. There was not even a ring nor a coin about the person of the deceased."

"Doubtless the money and valuables which might have been about your father at the time," remarked Sampson, "became the perquisites of the individual, whoever it might be, that Dysart engaged to dig the grave."

"The papers which this pocketbook contains," said Valentine, as he opened it, "do not appear to be much injured by the damp. But I will examine them hereafter."

He thereupon secured the pocketbook about his person, and then remunerated the medical gentleman with becoming liberality for the services they had rendered, and concerning which they were enjoined to the strictest secrecy, enough of the circumstances having been explained to them

to show wherefore it was desirable to screen the matter from the public gaze.

They then took their departure, and Sir Valentine remained with Sampson to deliberate upon the course which they should now pursue for the removal of the body.

"If you will leave the management of all this to me," observed Larry, after some discussion, "I will conduct it with the necessary privacy. My two men yonder, who have already filled up the grave, shall remain in charge of the deceased until night, and I will then come myself, with an undertaker on whom I can rely, and fetch away the remains in a coffin. They shall then be borne to your house, and I must leave you to give your dependents and friends what explanation you think fit."

This arrangement was accepted with much gratitude by Sir Valentine Malvern, and taking his departure from the villa, he procured a vehicle at Blackheath to convey him home to Hanover Square.

On arriving at his mansion at about five o'clock in the evening, he at once sent a note to Lord Florimel requesting an immediate call from his lordship; and when the nobleman arrived, Sir Valentine Malvern explained to him all that had taken place. He likewise gave him full particulars of the interview which had occurred with the prince regent on the previous evening, and having concluded his narrative, he said, "You must now hasten, my dear Florimel, and make all befitting excuses for my absence this day from your beloved niece. Tell her that having discovered my father's fate, I now remain at home to mourn in solitude for that death which, though long suspected, has only been proved a certainty within the last few hours. She will appreciate my feelings and will pardon my absence. Relative to all these details which concern herself, your lordship and your excellent lady will best know how to reveal so important a secret to my adored Florence."

Lord Florimel remained for some little while discoursing with Malvern upon the events which had thus so singularly transpired within the last four and twenty hours, and the young baronet could not help observing, as he reflected thereupon, that it almost seemed as if Providence had chosen to blend the threads of his own destiny with those of Florence Eaton's, for it was on repairing to Carlton House

to receive the revelation of a secret so nearly regarding her that he had found in the fragment of a letter the clue to that train of incidents which had so promptly led to the unravelment of the mystery concerning his father's fate. Lord Florimel himself was much struck by the circumstance, and on taking his leave of Malvern, he returned at once to Piccadilly to acquaint Pauline with all that had occurred, or, rather, as much as it was proper to reveal.

When once more alone, Malvern shut himself up in his own room and examined the contents of that pocketbook which had been found about his father's person. Then was it that with mingled amazement and sorrow he made a fresh discovery relative to the past incidents of his sire's career, a discovery concerning matters the bare existence of which Valentine had never even suspected, and which not only regarded himself but also others. In a word, a great mystery was now revealed; a secret was disclosed which, but for the discovery of this pocketbook, might for ever have remained buried in darkness. The revelation thus made imposed upon him, too, a duty which he must not postpone an hour longer than was absolutely necessary. In a word, he felt that the moment the funeral was over and his father's remains should have been consigned to consecrated ground, he must lose no time in the accomplishment of this duty to which we allude.

CHAPTER III

MORE PEARLS FROM THE STRING

It was between four and five o'clock on the same day of which we are writing that a handsome cabriolet, drawn by a splendid horse, dashed up to the front door of Leveson House. Everything was unexceptionable about the appearance of this equipage, save in respect to the groom who stood behind it. It was not that his livery was shabby, or that it was inconsistent with the dashing brilliancy of the "turnout." On the contrary, it was as fine as a gold hatband, a green coat with yellow buttons and plenty of lace, brown knee-breeches, and a new pair of top-boots could possibly combine to render it. But the defect was in the wearer, for most assuredly this groom was of a very singular, awkward, and unprepossessing appearance. He was thin, lank, and lean in person; his gait, so far from having the respectful assurance which characterizes a good servant enjoying the confidence of his master, was shuffling and shambling, while his looks were sneaking, downcast, and furtive. Indeed, he looked a veritable starveling, and seemed as if he were some whining, wretched mendicant who had been suddenly elevated from rags and the gutter to the full bloom of livery and a stand behind that dashing cabriolet.

When the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House, this menial crept down as if he were half-frightened lest the equipage should dash off and fling him on the curbstone, or lest the officers of justice were looking out for him in every direction. Indeed, he seemed altogether out of his element, but it must be likewise observed that his aspect was such as to render it difficult to decide what possible element could suit him. Sneaking along from the rear of the vehicle to the horse's head, he so placed himself in the shade of the

noble animal as if anxious to make it a screen to hide him from the view of all passers-by, and yet, as he held the bridle, a glance of satisfaction twinkled sidelong from his eyes as that look embraced in quick survey all the splendid features of the equipage.

Very different from the menial was the master who emerged from that dashing cabriolet. At the first glance he might have been mistaken for a bear escaped from the zoological gardens and dressed up in male attire, for he wore such an enormous quantity of hair about his face as almost to destroy the features that identified him as a human being. His black whiskers stuck out in great bushes, his mustachios were fiercer than any that are ever worn by an actor dressed up to play the part of a brigand for the stage, his brows were thick and overhanging, he wore an imperial, and his huge whiskers, meeting under the chin, were prolonged into a beard of which a pasha might have been proud. He was dressed in a semimilitary style, but with most outrageous pretensions. His frock coat was one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast, and as it was buttoned up to the chin, and therefore covered the waistcoat where the gold chain ought to have been, he wore this said chain outside his coat, a very little pocket being made to hold the watch belonging thereto. This chain was as massive and large as that of a sheriff or lord mayor, and therefore gave its wearer the appearance of uniting some civic dignity with his military rank. His gray trousers had a broad gold stripe down each leg, and were stretched tightly over boots brilliantly polished, with heels two inches high, and furnished with an immense pair of gold spurs.

Such was the phenomenon that emerged in stately grandeur from the cabriolet; and flinging the reins from his lemon-coloured kid gloves, or, rather, from the hands that wore them, he drew forth an embroidered cambric handkerchief so highly perfumed that it rendered the air fragrant.

" Now, Robin, take care of him," exclaimed Captain Tash, alluding to the horse, " and don't leave his head. Remember how he darted off the day before yesterday and discomfited the old apple-woman's stall. I am just going here to call upon my friend Leveson for a few minutes," continued the captain, exalting his voice in a bombastic style as some ladies and gentlemen passed by at the moment,

" and then we shall drive back to Carlton House. I am engaged to dine with his Royal Highness to-day," he added, in a still louder tone, so that the passers-by should not fail to catch the magnificent announcement.

Having thus spoken, while poor Robin looked as if he would have given the world to melt away out of the green livery and top-boots, and sink into the earth, the redoubtable Captain Tash stalked with an awful swagger into the mansion, the front door of which was opened by the hall-porter the moment his cab had dashed up to the house. The marquis was at home, and the captain was accordingly introduced into a parlour, where he was almost immediately joined by his lordship.

" Sit down, captain," said Leveson, in an affable manner, for he had good reason to be contented with the way in which the gallant officer had carried out the little commission entrusted to him.

" Devilish hot, to be sure, isn't it, Leveson? " exclaimed Tash, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

The marquis looked severe for a moment on being addressed thus familiarly, but smiling the next instant at the captain's impertinence, he said, " Very hot indeed, my dear Tash. What news? "

" Sackville has been going on at a glorious rate within the last two or three weeks," replied the captain. " He has taken such a fancy for the gaming-table that I could not possibly keep him away from it even if I wished."

" Ah, well," said the marquis, rubbing his hands gleefully, " so much the better, so much the better. Is he in want of cash again? "

" When I left him, half an hour back," replied the captain, " he was just screwing up his courage to go and tell his wife that if he didn't have twenty thousand to-night by eight o'clock he shall be a ruined man."

" Capital, excellent! " exclaimed Leveson, rubbing his hands harder than before, while the supremest satisfaction was expressed in every lineament, line, and wrinkle of his face. " How have you managed this? "

" He has been borrowing money on promissory notes, payable at sight, of the fellow who keeps the Golden Hell in St. James's Street, and I'll tell you what I have done," continued Tash, with as sly a look as could possibly beam

forth from the midst of all the hair that covered his face. "I have made this fellow write him a most peremptory letter, something in this style: 'My lord, if your lordship does not pay the nineteen thousand five hundred pounds for which I hold your lordship's I O U's by eight o'clock to-night, when the bank at my establishment opens, I shall be under the necessity of posting your name up in the room, and shall have you put into the *Satirist* and the *Age* next Sunday.'"

"And has this letter really gone?" demanded Leveson, almost in ecstasies of delight.

"By Jupiter! I saw it sent off myself at about two o'clock to Carlton House, and when I went at three to call on Sackville, as usual, I pretended to be fearfully indignant on reading the said letter, which he thrust into my hand the moment I entered his room. Lord, how I did swear against that gambling-house keeper! I called him all the 'd——d scoundrels' I could think of; and if oaths were things, and only as heavy as feathers, I am sure I swore enough of them to break a horse's back if they were all collected together and laid upon it. Of course Sackville appealed to me for my advice and assistance. He always does, I have made myself so necessary to him. Well, I assured him that the money must be paid, for that the gaming-house keeper was a nasty fellow and would do his worst. Then how was the money to be got? That was the next question. Could I raise it on a loan? No; all the money-lenders I am acquainted with had got plenty of his bills already. He walked up and down the room in great agitation, and at length exclaimed, stopping short, 'Come, Tash, I know you must have some sort of advice to give me, if you will.' Then I looked very grave, observing that the only thing I could recommend was for him to ask his wife, as she seemed to possess an inexhaustible treasure somewhere or another. 'No, impossible!' he cried, 'I dare not ask her for any more. Would you believe it,' he added, 'that the whole amount I have had from her during the last six or seven months has run up to no less than fifty thousand pounds?' I expressed my joy that he had a wife who was able to act as his banker to such a glorious extent, but I think he blushed a little and looked rather confused, as if he were not altogether pleased with the allusion. However, immediately recovering himself,

he said, ' Well, I suppose I must make up my mind to go and ask Venetia.' And your lordship may depend upon it that I urged everything I possibly could in order to make him follow up this resolution. So when I left him just now, he was going to Lady Sackville's boudoir to make known his wants and demand her succour."

" You have managed most admirably, Captain Tash," said the marquis. " Does Lord Sackville frequently hint at this mysterious source of wealth which his wife possesses? "

" On two or three occasions, when more communicative than at other times," answered the captain, " he has expressed his wonder where Venetia can possibly get so much money from; and once, when considerably obfuscated with wine, of which he had drunk great quantities in the desperation of a frightful run of ill-luck at the gaming-table, he observed that he knew very well it was not from the prince she received such vast pecuniary subsidies, as his Royal Highness himself was most frightfully hampered in that respect."

" Ah, well, it matters but little what Sackville says or thinks," observed Lord Leveson, in a musing tone. Then rising from his chair as a hint to Captain Tash that the present interview need not be prolonged, he presented the gallant officer with a couple of bank-notes for a hundred pounds each, saying, " You have played your cards excellently, and I am more than satisfied with all you have done. It is most probable that the necessity will soon cease for you to continue the work of plunging Sackville into these difficulties, — but, however, I will let you know in due course."

Thereupon Captain Tash took his departure, and as he issued forth from the Marquis of Leveson's house to reënter his cabriolet, he strode forward with so grand an air, with such a tremendous swagger, and with his immense bell-shaped hat perched in so singular a fashion over his right ear, that he looked not only as if Albemarle Street itself belonged to him, but as if the whole of the West End were his private property.

Immediately after Captain Tash had thus taken his departure, the Marquis of Leveson opened his writing-desk, drew out a private drawer, and proceeded to count the pearls which it contained. When he had finished, a smile

of gloating satisfaction and sensual triumph appeared upon his countenance, and as he locked up the desk again, he said to himself, "She will be mine, she will be mine!"

About an hour afterward, Lady Sackville's carriage dashed up to the house, and the marquis went forth to the very threshold in order to receive the brilliant Venetia, for whose visit the intelligence he had received from Captain Tash had so fully prepared him. She endeavoured to look as self-possessed and composed as possible, but the keen eye of the marquis could not fail to observe a deeper shade of seriousness on her countenance than he had ever seen before, and at the same time the glitter of uneasiness in her magnificent eyes. But he appeared not to notice this betrayal of emotion on her part, and with profound respect escorted her into the parlour where he had so recently received the gallant officer.

"I am come to draw upon you again, my noble banker," said Venetia, making a great effort to smile with a sort of dignified good-humour, but there was something sickly in it as she drew forth the string whence so many of the pearls had already disappeared.

"I am entirely at your ladyship's service," replied the Marquis of Leveson, "and believe me when I assure you, without flattery, that the happiest moments of my life are those when your ladyship honours me with your presence."

"Perhaps your lordship means to convey a little covert satire in that remark," said Venetia, with a perceptible bitterness in her tone. "You look upon each visit which I thus pay you as a step bringing me nearer and nearer to the catastrophe which you so confidently expect will take place?"

"I hope that your ladyship will acquit me of aught savouring of such rudeness as satire," rejoined the marquis with a bow, "for, believe me, Lady Sackville, I am incapable of a discourteous act toward you."

"And yet your lordship's antecedents do not altogether justify the remark," exclaimed Venetia, who was in one of those humours which compelled her, as it were, to vent her spite a little upon the very man on whose purse, if not actual bounty, she had come to make a large claim. "However, we will not dispute, my lord," she immediately added, recovering her wonted air of dignity mingled with exquisite

politeness. "I am in want of money, and have brought my cheque-book."

With these words she unfastened the string and prepared to take off as many pearls as would represent the sum she needed, while the Marquis of Leveson opened his desk and produced a large bundle of bank-notes.

"One — two — three," and thus did Venetia go on counting until she had numbered twenty, but when these twenty pearls had been successively drawn off the string, only one more remained upon it.

Raising her eyes toward the marquis, she caught the expression of triumph which had gradually expanded upon his features into actual radiance as he beheld Venetia detach all those pearls.

"Ah! my lord," she exclaimed, in a voice thrilling with exultation, "I have still one pearl left, and that shall never find its way into your hands. Even at the risk of making you repent altogether of your bargain and refuse to honour the demands which these twenty pearls represent, do I promise you that the one remaining here shall never, never depart from me."

"Your ladyship is the mistress to act as you choose," observed Lord Leveson, in a voice of bland politeness; and without even noticing Venetia's allusion to a possible refusal on his part to supply her with any further funds, he at once proceeded to count down twenty bank-notes each for a thousand pounds. "I believe that your ladyship will find this sum correct," and handing the notes over to her, he waited until she herself had counted them ere he took up a single pearl from the table.

"The sum is correct, and I thank your lordship," said Venetia, in a low and tremulous voice, for the remembrance flashed vividly to her mind at the moment that of all the six who had originally made her the object of their amorous pursuits, five had already revelled in her charms, and feeble was now the barrier which separated her from the power of the sixth.

His lordship consigned the pearls to his desk, while Venetia thrust the bank-notes into her bosom. She then rose and drew down her veil, to hide the emotion which she felt that her features were but too likely to betray. The marquis handed her back to her carriage, which immediately

drove off to Carlton House, and on arriving there, Venetia at once repaired to the apartment where her husband was anxiously awaiting her presence.

"There, Horace," she said, tossing the bank-notes upon the table with an air so strange that it even resembled a state of mind bordering upon desperation, "this is the sum you require. But understand me well, it is the last I shall be enabled to procure for you."

"My dear Venetia, you are very angry with me, or else you are much annoyed and agitated?" said Horace, approaching her with soothing looks and great kindness of manner.

"No, let us not enter upon any discussion," said Venetia, but still with an uneasy and almost wild look. "Suffice it for you that I have procured the money which is to save you from exposure and ruin; but let me impress it upon your mind that if you involve yourself in any further dilemmas, it will be useless to apply to me for the means of extricating you therefrom."

"Tell me, dear Venetia," said Lord Sackville, seized with an irresistible feeling of curiosity, "what is the source of this mysterious wealth of yours? I remember when first you assisted me with money, you led me to believe it emanated from the gifts received from the prince, but when I reflect upon the very large amounts for which I am indebted to your kindness, I am of course well aware that his Royal Highness has not the means of affording you such supplies. Besides, on this occasion, at all events, you have been somewhere to procure the amount now so generously placed at my disposal," for Venetia had not laid aside her bonnet and scarf ere rejoining her husband in the parlour where he had been waiting for her.

"Horace," she said, in a low voice, and at the same time fixing upon him a reproachful look, "if you have any compunctious feelings as to the mode in which I may have obtained these large supplies with which at different times I have succoured you, surely you would be just if not generous enough to take the full measure of blame unto yourself for those extravagances, vicious pursuits, and inordinate follies which have compelled you thus to appeal to my resources?"

"Good God! what mean you, Venetia?" exclaimed

Horace, recoiling from the idea which suddenly smote him as with the blow of a hammer. "Is it possible that you — you — "

And he hesitated, he dared not complete the sentence, but he gazed with a look of mingled agony and shame on the splendid countenance of his wife, that countenance which the warm blood was now richly suffusing.

"I know what you would say. You would ask me whether I have prostituted myself to obtain these moneys?" and her tone was penetrated with a poignant bitterness. "No, no, it has not come to that yet," she continued, her features suddenly lighting up with a feeling of satisfaction, "but the next time you demand money of me, I must either refuse you, or else — "

"No, no, that shall never be," exclaimed Sackville, with a shudder. "All my feelings as a man, as a husband, revolt against such a horror. When our compact was formed, — that compact which left us to follow our own inclinations, irrespective of all the ties of love or marriage, — it was that we might each pursue that career of fashionable pleasure which may be depravity in the true sense of the word, but which, at all events, should have nothing grovelling, low, and despicably mean about it. In a word, I understood that you might shine as the mistress of the prince, and bestow your favours where the whim or fancy prompted you, but to sell your charms, Venetia — no, no, never, never!"

"Ah! you would not, then, like to know that I became so thoroughly lost to every sense of delicacy as that?" said Venetia, surprised, and not altogether displeased at the vehemence with which her husband had spoken on the point.

"I should hate, I should loathe, I should abominate you," was the quick reply which Horace gave.

"Then you do still love me a little?" said Venetia, in a tremulous voice.

"Think you that having once loved you so fondly, so devotedly, so enthusiastically," exclaimed Horace, seating himself by the side of his splendid wife and taking her hand, "it is possible to have ceased to love you altogether? No, no; besides which, you are so beautiful, so grandly handsome, it were impossible to help loving you. Ah! if our destiny had been otherwise, if we had been permitted at the time of our marriage to remain in that comparatively humble

sphere which was properly our own, we should doubtless have been happier than we are now. At all events, our love would have flowed on like a pure crystal stream that is unpolluted, uncontaminated — "

" Then the splendours, the brilliancies, the pomps, and the honours of a court life are already losing their attractions for you, Horace? " interrupted Venetia, an ineffable tenderness stealing upon her and melting that heart the chords of which had of late vibrated to but few of the better feelings of human nature.

" Would to God," cried Horace, the anguished look he had before shown again sweeping over his countenance, which, though handsome as ever, had recently grown pale with dissipation, " would to God that I could throw off these golden shackles which a lordly title and a courtly office have riveted upon my limbs, ay, not only upon my limbs, but upon my mind also! Venetia, I am sick of it. This scene which is now passing between you and me has aroused in my mind feelings and sentiments long dormant there, and has revived many blissful memories of the past. Would to God that all this had never happened, that when we were married we had fled far away from those who had the power to coerce us."

" Yes, but we were so completely in their power," murmured Venetia, deeply moved by the impassioned language to which her husband had been giving utterance. " It is useless to regret all that has taken place — "

" But the future, Venetia," interrupted Horace, as he threw upon her a strange, wild look, " dare you plunge your eyes into the future? It is true that we may be elevated to a more exalted rank than that which we at present hold. The prince will no doubt fulfil his promise, and on the day when the death of his father shall make him King of England will bestow still loftier titles upon us. But of what avail will be the exchange of a baron's coronet for that of an earl, if life can be only passed by plunging into dissipations and profligacies of all kinds in order to escape from thought? Believe me, Venetia, had we at our marriage remained in private life, existing only for each other, and imbibing all our happiness from the pure fount of sincere and honourable love, never, never should I have crossed the threshold of the gaming-house, never should I have become addicted to the

juice of the grape, never should I have grown a voluptuary and a debauchee. But all this I am now, all this I have become in less than a year, — in a few short months, I may say; and in moments of cool and sober reflection I loathe, I hate myself. Heavens! you weep, Venetia, oh, you weep, and you, then, are also moved, you feel, on your side, the same as I do?"

"Yes, yes, my dear Horace," she murmuringly interrupted him, "would to God that we could recall the past, but it is impossible. Our destiny is fixed; we must follow it, we must obey it, and though brilliant in the eyes of the world, yet does it carry its own punishment along with it. Yes, because it will not bear the calmness of reflection, and in order that existence can be made tolerable, it must be an incessant whirl of giddy pleasures, frenzied enjoyments, and intoxicating delights."

"Oh, to live such a life on to the end!" exclaimed Horace, as if stricken with a cold shudder. "Nevertheless, as you say, dear Venetia, it must be endured. But at this moment I am jealous of you, I love you again as a wife, I am mad to think that these glorious charms of yours should ever have been possessed by another, — perhaps by others."

"Horace," Venetia suddenly observed, exerting herself with a strong effort to subdue her emotions, "this scene can endure no longer. I understand, I appreciate, and I share all the feelings which have been excited in your breast, but it is useless, worse than useless, to yield to these moments of softness and tenderness. We must fulfil our destiny, we must observe our compact."

"Yes, there is no alternative," said Horace. "But, at all events, there is a melancholy pleasure in such a scene as this, and methinks that it does one good."

"No, it is a weakness to which we ought not to yield," immediately rejoined Venetia, "because it cannot lead to any beneficial result. We know too much of each other, Horace, ever to experience again that sublime confidence, that full and complete trustfulness, which alone can constitute the true happiness of wedded life. On your side, you know that I have been unfaithful to you, and on my side, I know that you have been unfaithful to me. I use the word unfaithful to express my meaning, although it be scarcely applicable, for that cannot be rightly termed unfaithfulness which is the

result of agreement and mutually assented to. But what I mean you to understand is that, knowing what we do of each other, it were impossible, even were we to abandon a court life, fly away to a distance, and bury ourselves in some complete solitude, it would be impossible, I say, for us to experience that full measure of affection which must be unalloyed and uncontaminated in order to be complete. In this hour when our natures have melted beneath the influence of those better feelings which are not altogether extinct within us, we experience a revival of all the first freshness of our love, but this would not last. That moral purity which is love's vital and sustaining power exists not in our case, and in a short time, when this transitory tenderness had passed away and our minds had recovered their wonted tone, we should blush as we looked each other in the face."

"Yes, 'tis too true, too true," murmured Horace, in a deep voice and with a profound mournfulness in his looks.

"Then again, I say," hurriedly continued Venetia, "let us still yield to the strong current of our destiny," and she was about to speed from the room, when, observing the bank-notes upon the table, her recollections were in an instant recalled to the origin of this singular and indeed romantic scene with her husband. "My dear Horace," she said, turning back and placing her hand upon his arm while she looked earnestly into his countenance, "you will remember all that I have told you, will you not?" and she pointed to the bank-notes.

"My God, yes!" he exclaimed, evidently still under the influence of what has been already termed the better feelings of his nature. "I would destroy myself," he added, vehemently, "sooner than be the cause of plunging you more deeply down —"

But Venetia, waiting not to hear the remainder of the sentence, sped away from the room. Hastening up to her own boudoir, she flung off her bonnet and scarf, opened her jewel-case, and carefully deposited therein the one pearl remaining upon the string. Then, seating herself at the table, she drew forth from her writing-desk a number of letters, and began reading them with earnest attention. Oh, often and often had she perused those letters before, and in some parts there were traces of tears that had fallen,

ay, and fallen thickly too, for the writing was in those places wholly obliterated. But she now read them again, because the scene with her husband had opened her mind to those tender sympathies which even the most callous natures or the most worldly dispositions must feel at times.

Yes, she read them again and again; she wept also over those letters, for this was an hour of Venetia's weakness, one of those chastening intervals which occur in the existence of every woman, no matter how lofty her ambition, how unprincipled her conduct, or how profligate her ways.

But in the midst of this occupation her confidential dependent Jessica knocked at the boudoir, and on being desired to enter, she said, "An elderly gentlewoman desires to see your ladyship immediately."

"Who is she? What is her name?" asked Venetia, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes.

"She would not say, my lady. In fact, I do not know her, I never saw her before; and she seems a respectable kind of a person. She declares that it is most urgent business on which she desires to see your ladyship."

"Then show her up here," said Venetia, "and order dinner to be served in half an hour."

"Does your ladyship dine alone?"

"Yes, quite alone to-day, for the first time, indeed, for the last six weeks. But the prince has got a dinner-party of convivial friends and boon companions, from which ladies are excluded. However, show this female up at once."

Jessica flitted away, and during the five minutes of her absence Venetia replaced the letters in her desk, which she locked. She then looked at herself in the glass, wiped away all traces of her tears, arranged her hair, and, reseating herself, prepared to receive with composed feelings the visitress who was approaching.

Presently the door opened, and Jessica, having ushered in the "elderly gentlewoman," immediately withdrew. But instantaneously recognizing this female's countenance, Venetia gave a start as if seized with a cold shudder, and it was evidently with a sickening sensation that she exclaimed, "Ah, Mrs. Gale!"

CHAPTER IV

THE UNWELCOME VISITRESS

Yes, it was the infamous woman who kept the fashionable house of resort in Soho Square, that now stood in the presence of Venetia. Our readers will remember that we have described her as having a matronly air; indeed, she was a woman of what might be termed motherly respectability, one of those kind, good-natured souls who would not tread upon a worm, who make the kindest of aunts and the most indulgent of grandmothers, and are always distributing blankets or giving away soup-tickets amongst the poor. No wonder, then, that Jessica had taken her for " a respectable gentlewoman," while in reality beneath that pleasing demeanour was veiled a character of the most depraved and infamous description.

" Yes, my lady, it's me, Mrs. Gale," she said, in reply to Venetia's ejaculation. Then, looking back to assure herself that the door was shut, she advanced toward the brilliant Lady Sackville, observing, with a knowing look, " Ah! I am glad to see you so well off. Many and many a time have I thought of calling, both when you was at Acacia Cottage, and since you have been here at Carlton House, but somehow or another things have always happened to prevent me."

" And what has brought you here now? " asked Venetia, in a faint voice, for she could neither appear composed or dignified, nor yet assume any air of fortitude at all, in the presence of that vile old procuress.

" Why should I come, my dear lady," said Mrs. Gale, quietly depositing herself upon a chair, though uninvited, " except to have a little bit of chat and also talk about another small matter, — of which, however, more presently.

Well, what a sweet room you have got here, to be sure!" she continued, calmly gazing around her and looking, for all the world, as if she felt herself a most welcome guest. "I never did see such a beautiful boudoir in all my life, and I can tell your ladyship that I have been in a few in my time. But really one would think that you wasn't pleased to see me?"

"Yes, I am very pleased," murmured Venetia, still in a faint voice; and though she endeavoured to appear more affable toward the woman, yet for the life of her she could not.

"Then you are unwell, or you have had something to annoy you, for you certainly don't look quite the thing. And yet, dear me! you ought to be happy as the day is long. Here you are, married to a very handsome man, a lady of title, rolling in riches, riding in a carriage, living in a palace, the star of fashion, the worshipped of the aristocracy, and her favourite mistress of the prince."

"Which I suppose is pretty generally known," remarked Venetia, now growing more collected and speaking with mingled bitterness and irony.

"Yes, it's well known enough," replied Mrs. Gale, either not observing or else not choosing to observe the peculiarity of Venetia's accents, "and very proud you ought to be when you think of it. Ah! I dare say you are indeed envied enough; and as for jealousy, why, it's natural that every handsome woman about the court should be jealous of your ladyship. But it's no wonder you have risen to such a rank, and that you are able to keep it, for the very first day you and me met, you struck me as being the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in all my life. But you are really handsomer now than ever. Setting aside that little look of annoyance which you wore just now, but which seems to be passing, I declare you appear more brilliant, more magnificent, than ever."

"I thank you for these assurances," said Venetia, not altogether insensible to the tribute just paid to the grandeur of her charms.

"Ah! it would indeed have been a pity," continued Mrs. Gale, "if anything else had happened to you than what did at the time —"

"Be pleased to tell me," interrupted Venetia, hastily, "what special business has brought you hither now; for

that you have some other purpose than that of merely conversing with me, you yourself have avowed."

"Well, there is a little favour your ladyship can do me," rejoined Mrs. Gale, with her blandest tone and her most motherly looks.

"Ah! favour — favour," muttered Venetia, impatiently, between her pearly teeth. "No one ever comes near me except to ask a favour or extort money."

"And your ladyship, being so kind, so good, and so amiable," added Mrs. Gale, who had caught every word thus uttered, but did not choose to take offence at the meaning of the sentence, "never refuses anybody. I know your ladyship does not. The very newspapers speak of your generosity, your charity, your benevolence."

"Yes, but it is not charity which you, Mrs. Gale, can possibly seek at my hands," said Venetia.

"Well, I don't know that it's exactly charity, but I am in a terrible mess of troubles at the present moment, and I really don't know how to get myself out of them. Your ladyship has no doubt read the account of that rascal Emmerson, who was executed on Monday?"

"Yes. But what of him?"

"Why, between you and me and the post," returned Mrs. Gale, "he was accustomed to use my house, especially with that Lady Curzon, whose death at Geneva has lately been in all the papers. No doubt your ladyship has seen that, too?"

"Yes, I have read the whole of that tragedy of horrors," answered Venetia, quickly. "But proceed."

"Speaking of this tragedy, is it not a dreadful thing?" said Mrs. Gale, who was apt to be garrulous. "Why, of all the names figuring in that strange story, I know several; and now that they are dead and gone, there is no harm in speaking of them. But if they were alive, not a word about their doings would issue from my lips. Discretion, — there is nothing like discretion. That's my motto. But however, as I was saying, I knew several of them. Malpas was at one time constantly at my house along with Lady Curzon, and afterward she used to come with Emmerson, and then — But, 'pon my word, I beg your ladyship's pardon," exclaimed the woman, who really had forgotten all about the intrigue of the deceased countess with Lady Sackville's husband

and the scandal which the discovery thereof had created at the time. " It didn't strike me at the moment what delicate ground I was treading on. However, these things do happen in fashionable life, and so I dare say your ladyship has taken it cool enough about your husband. But, as I was saying, I have had Malpas and Lady Curzon in my house, and I also had the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott one night at my house. Ah! I dare say she thought at the time that I didn't know her, but I did, though. I had seen her in attendance upon the queen at Windsor Castle."

" Do you mean to tell me that you have ever been inside Windsor Castle? " asked Venetia, evidently suspecting that the woman was indulging in a mere idle piece of bravado.

" Ay, that I have, more than once," she confidently rejoined, " and have acted as midwife there, too. But of that no matter. Few people know better than I do that a court is not the centre of virtue, and that ladies in waiting and women of the bedchamber may now and then have a child, though perhaps their husbands have been absent as governors of colonies or generals of armies for two or three years. Besides which, though a lady may be a maid of honour by title, it doesn't follow she should be so in fact; and let me assure you, also," added Mrs. Gale, significantly, as if she could tell more if she chose, " that the royal princesses are not the most virtuous ladies in existence."

" So I have heard," remarked Venetia, unwillingly suffering herself to be interested in this conversation; but suddenly recollecting the infamous character of the woman whom she was thus encouraging in her tittle-tattle, and also remembering that time was passing away and that her dinner-hour approached, she said, " But pray come to the point, Mrs. Gale. You began by speaking to me about the forger Emmerson."

" Ah, the villain! " ejaculated the dame. " As I told your ladyship just now, he used to frequent my house, and paid so liberally that I had the highest opinion of him. Besides, to tell you the truth, on two or three occasions when he was there with Lady Curzon, I happened to overhear them chatting together."

" In plain terms, you listened, I suppose? " said Venetia, scarcely able to conceal her disgust for the woman or her impatience at her garrulity.

"Well, well, I suppose it was so," replied Mrs. Gale, laughing. "But, sure enough, I heard Emmerson talking about writing her ladyship cheques for thousands of pounds, and so I had the highest opinion of my customer. Thinking that I should like to lay out some money at good interest, I one evening spoke to Mr. Emmerson on the matter, and he told me to come and see him upon the business at his office. So I paid him a visit accordingly, and put a couple of thousand pounds into his hands. Soon afterward he told me that he had an opportunity of laying out three thousand more to the greatest advantage, and I was fool enough to nibble at the bait. Well, my dear lady, to make a long story short — "

"Yes, do for Heaven's sake!" interjected Venetia.

"I will," answered Mrs. Gale. "I have lost, then, better than five thousand pounds by that Emmerson, and it's a very cruel thing to lose one's hard earnings in that manner," added the woman, shaking her head with as much solemn mournfulness as if it were the produce of the most honourable industry instead of the wages of iniquity that she was thus deploring.

"Pray go on. Wherefore do you come to me? The loss you speak of can have scarcely impoverished you," observed Venetia.

"Yes, but it has put me to very great inconvenience," returned Mrs. Gale, "because I have a certain sum to pay to-morrow by twelve o'clock for a renewal of the lease of my house in Soho Square, and what little money I have got left is so locked up that I really can't touch it. If I don't pay the lawyers to-morrow by twelve o'clock, I lose the lease; and you, my dear Lady Sackville, who have seen my establishment and know how beautifully fitted up it is, must be aware how dreadfully inconvenient it would be to have to turn out and get another, besides the loss of custom in the meantime. So I thought that if you would accommodate me with a couple of thousand pounds — "

"I!" ejaculated Venetia, in mingled astonishment and indignation. "I accommodate you with such an amount!"

"Yes, you," rejoined the woman, all in a moment assuming the insolent look and dogged manner of an extortioner resolute in bleeding a victim.

"What, this impertinence to me?" exclaimed Venetia,

her eyes flashing fire as she started from her seat. "How dare you force your way into my presence for such a purpose as this?"

"Because might makes right," answered Mrs. Gale, with an impudent leer, all the benevolence of her manner having become changed into a coarse, brutal, dogged air.

"Might against right!" ejaculated Venetia, scornfully. "What mean you?"

"I mean that your ladyship is completely in my power," returned Mrs. Gale. "Come, now, those eyes of yours are very handsome, but none the more so for flashing fire, and as I am very tough, I am not going to be singed by their looks. Two thousand pounds I want, and two thousand pounds I mean to have from you."

"And what if I refuse?" said Venetia, her cheeks becoming pale with rage and her lips white and quivering.

"But you don't dare refuse. One word from my lips would blast your reputation for ever."

"'Tis false, vile hag!" exclaimed Lady Sackville. "I was pure, I was virtuous —"

"Ay, but who would believe it?" cried Mrs. Gale, jeeringly. "Not a soul in the universe. Besides, whether or not —"

"This is a detestable proceeding on your part," interrupted Venetia, a prey to mingled terror and rage.

"It may be so, but I am not the less determined. You are rolling in riches, and never as yet have you given one single sixpence to the person who may be said to have been the very one that introduced you to this brilliant career, — I mean myself."

"I dare say you received your reward from others?" observed Venetia, evidently irresolute how to act.

"That has nothing to do with it," at once retorted Mrs. Gale. "The trifle I received at the time was a beggarly pittance indeed, compared with the service I have rendered you. Why, if you had any gratitude in your nature you would have made me a present the very moment you were installed in that beautiful place down at Knightsbridge. But if you didn't then, you surely ought to have thought of me when made a peeress and brought here to live in a palace."

"Well," observed Venetia, thinking it prudent to adopt

a conciliatory tone, "I will give you some proof of my gratitude on a future occasion. I am unable to do it now. So far from rolling in riches, I am actually most dreadfully embarrassed at this present moment."

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted Mrs. Gale, with coarse rudeness. "I don't believe a word of it. Besides, you sha'n't put me off with any trumpery excuses of this kind. You have already behaved ungrateful enough, and just now, if I hadn't shown a spirit, you would have had me kicked out of the place. But I wasn't to be put down by you."

"I did not intend to be uncivil," observed Venetia, showing by the increasing meekness of her manner how cruelly embarrassed she was.

"Ah! it's all very fine for you to eat humble pie now, but you wouldn't have done so if I hadn't brought you down a peg or two. Come, my lady," added the woman, with increasing insolence alike of tone and manner, "hand me over two thousand pounds to-night, or to-morrow morning I will spread it abroad all over London that the brilliant, the proud, the worshipped Lady Sackville was — "

"Hush! — enough, desist, I implore you!" cried Venetia. "Two thousand pounds! I cannot give you that sum to-night."

"But I will and must have it," said Mrs. Gale, resuming the seat from which she had risen, "and here will I remain till it is forthcoming."

"But this is the vilest, the most hideous of tyrannies," exclaimed Venetia, trembling with excitement.

"I dare say it is," rejoined the woman, who, perceiving that her triumph was sure, grew more and more resolute, insolent, and dogged.

"To-morrow, at any hour you choose to name — "

"No, I shall come here no more. To-morrow the doors would be shut in my face."

"On my honour, as a lady — "

"Enough! I will have the money to-night."

"But I have it not," cried Venetia, in a positive agony of excitement.

"Then you can get it," returned the woman, brutally.

"Here, take my jewels, anything, everything, as a guarantee that I will send you the money to redeem them."

" No, if I took them away, you would declare I had stolen them. It is useless to continue this discussion. Besides," added Mrs. Gale, vindictively, " I saw from the very first that you liked my presence as little as might be, and just now you would have turned me out if you had dared. So I choose to be revenged on you in my own way for your impudence. That's the reason which makes me so peremptory in demanding the money at once, besides my really wanting it for to-morrow, which is no lie. Let me see," she continued, looking at her watch, " it is now seven o'clock. Well, I don't mind staying here till midnight. You can in the meantime go amongst your friends and get the money."

"But you cannot possibly mean to remain here all these hours? " cried Venetia.

" I do," was the dogged response.

Lady Sackville threw herself upon the sofa in despair. What was to be done? She flung a glance at Mrs. Gale, on whose countenance sat the most determined resoluteness of purpose. Further appeal to her was all in vain. Venetia then swept her eyes around the boudoir, as if in search of something that might be suggestive of the manner in which she was to act. She felt as if she could immolate the insolent old extortioner to her rage. Ah! a sudden idea struck her, and, springing from her seat, she said, " Wait a few minutes," and hurried from the room.

Her hope was that her husband, who was to dine with the prince, might not as yet have parted with the twenty thousand pounds she had given him an hour before, in which case she would obtain of him the wherewith to satisfy Mrs. Gale. But Horace, whom she found in his dressing-room, had already sent off the money to the gambling-house keeper by Captain Tash, who was himself to form one of the royal party. Lord Sackville had therefore only five hundred pounds left, which he offered to his wife, and which she accepted. But perceiving that she was agitated, he asked her what it was that annoyed her, and for what purpose she required the money, whereupon she observed that it was merely an importunate milliner's bill which had been presented, but that the five hundred pounds would satisfy the applicant at present. She said nothing about Mrs. Gale, because, though her husband was acquainted with nearly all the circumstances of her earlier life, he was nevertheless

ignorant of that one event which had connected her at any period and even for a single day with the infamous woman. The excuse which Venetia made, as the reason for requiring the money, satisfied Horace, who was, moreover, in too great a hurry to dress, he being already late, to remain conversing unnecessarily, and Venetia sped back to the boudoir with the bank-notes for five hundred pounds crumpled up in her hand.

On again entering into the presence of Mrs. Gale, Venetia offered the money as an earnest of her good faith, but this very proceeding on her part only tended to confirm the woman's belief that she would raise heaven and earth to obtain the entire sum rather than incur the risk of the threatened exposure. Mrs. Gale accordingly refused the instalment, and reiterated her determination to abide in that boudoir until the whole sum, in good bank-notes or in gold, was placed in her hands. This decision she made known with a voice and manner still further proving how inexorable she was, and how useless it would be to argue with her.

Again, therefore, was Venetia in despair. What could she do? To leave herself at the mercy of this low, brutal woman, would be the same as suicide, for indeed, if once exposed, nought but self-destruction would remain for her. Never, never could she, the magnificent, the proud, the worshipped Venetia, endure to behold the lips of other titled dames curling with scorn, and their looks beaming with contempt upon her. Any sacrifice, yes, any, must therefore be made in order to avert the impending danger. For a moment she thought of amassing all her jewels and diamonds, and sending them by Jessica to be pledged, but she remembered that the very next day she was to entertain a select party at luncheon, and she could not possibly appear without her usual embellishments. Not that her beauty required these auxiliaries, but it was the fashion of the day which rendered a profusion of jewelry the indispensable requisite for every toilet.

What was to be done? There was one course to be adopted, and from this she recoiled with a cold shuddering. Yet where was the alternative? It were useless to apply to the prince; she knew that at the moment he was entirely without funds. She had plenty of friends to whom she could address herself, but it would be such an exposure of poverty to them, and, if the circumstance were whispered abroad, would prove

the most painful mortification. The only man of whom she could safely ask such a favour was absent from town for a few days: this was Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Therefore, having fruitlessly racked her brain for upwards of five minutes, she once more turned her looks appealingly upon Mrs. Gale, but the woman was gazing upon her in a manner which showed that she perceived how cruelly Venetia was embarrassed, and that she was actually enjoying it. Goaded therefore to desperation, and suddenly nerving herself to make that last sacrifice which was uppermost in her thoughts, and from which she had recoiled ere now with so strong a loathing, she rang the bell violently.

In a few moment Jessica made her appearance, and Venetia, in a low whisper, bade her hasten and order a hackney-coach around to the private door of the palace. The abigail, without waiting to ask a single question, but doubtless well knowing that her mistress would bestow her usual confidence on her at the first fitting opportunity, hastened to execute the order she had received. Venetia then put on a plain bonnet with a thick veil, and a dark coloured shawl. She took something from her jewel-case and hastily thrust the object into her bosom, and when her preparations were thus made, she turned toward Mrs. Gale, saying, in a low, thick voice, " I am going to a friend who resides at some distance, to procure this money. It may be two or three hours before I return."

" I have given you until midnight," answered the woman, " and here therefore shall I remain during the interval."

Venetia spoke not another word, but hastily quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER V

THE LAST PEARL

As she rolled along in the slow, lumbering hackney-coach, Lady Sackville was a prey to a variety of the most disagreeable, indeed, painful reflections. Since the month of December till the present time, it now being July, no less than ninety-nine thousand pounds had been squandered between herself and her husband. Of this enormous amount he had monopolized seventy thousand; the remainder she herself had made away with, Curzon and Malpas having received the greater portion of the sum. Now, out of the hundred thousand pounds which Lord Leveson had for his own special purposes placed at her disposal, but one thousand remained to be yet drawn.

In addition to the immense sum of ninety-nine thousand pounds thus scandalously lavished, thus infamously made away with, were to be reckoned the emoluments of Lord Sackville's office and the pecuniary presents which Venetia had received from the prince, and although the latter were not large, still they formed an item not to be omitted in a general reckoning up of all sources of revenue. As she contemplated the frightful waste of money which had thus taken place, Venetia was absolutely dismayed, and she thought to herself that if these extravagances were to continue, Heaven alone knew whence the means of ministering to them were to come. Bitterly, bitterly, did she repent having so far yielded to her husband's demands as to supply his wants so readily. Had she refused to do so, she would not at this moment be at her wits' end for a paltry fifteen hundred pounds to make up the amount demanded by the extortionate Mrs. Gale. But these are always the lessons which a reckless extravagance has to learn,

the bitter experiences which a lavish profusion is sure to reap.

On many other disagreeable things did Lady Sackville ponder as she was borne along in the hackney-coach; but when the vehicle suddenly stopped she gave a convulsive shudder, ejaculating audibly to herself, " No, no! "

Indeed, she was on the point of ordering the driver to turn back, when all the danger that she ran of again facing Mrs. Gale empty-handed presented itself vividly to her imagination, and she accordingly alighted from the hackney-coach the moment one of the Marquis of Leveson's servants, issuing forth from the hall, opened the door of the vehicle.

For it was to this nobleman's mansion that Venetia had come; but with the thick veil drawn in double folds over her face, she was not recognized by the domestics, no, nor even by his lordship's shrewd and cunning valet Brockman, as this individual escorted her up to the Crimson Drawing-room.

Venetia retained her veil over her countenance until the door again opened. Then, as the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance, little suspecting who his female visitant might be, Lady Sackville revealed her face, saying, " 'Tis I, my lord, who am come to implore your forbearance, or else to surrender at discretion."

The marquis was so taken by surprise that a dizziness seized for an instant upon his brain, and he staggered back a pace or two. But almost immediately recovering himself he took Venetia's hand, conducted her to a seat, placed himself near her, and then, gazing in mingled suspense and joy upon her countenance, he said, " Did I understand your ladyship aright, or was it only a delicious dream? "

" My lord, I am at your mercy," answered Venetia, the colour coming and going in quick transitions upon her cheeks a dozen times in a moment as she produced the string with the one remaining pearl, and handed that last representative of the hundred thousand pounds to the marquis.

" Oh, then it is no dream, it is a reality, a bright, a glorious reality," exclaimed the nobleman, his voice thrilling with exultation. " At length the moment is come when I may wind my arms around you and say, ' Venetia, you are mine! ' "

Suiting the action to the word, Lord Leveson seized Lady Sackville in his fervid embrace, and covered her lips with

kisses. She did not resist him. There was a slight recoil on her part, the recoil of an intense loathing which she experienced, but which she cared not now to display more than she could help, because the greater her repugnance the more signal his triumph. Even that slight shudder the marquis did not notice in the ardour with which he bestowed those caresses upon her. Then, unwinding his arms, he took off her bonnet, he tore away her shawl from her shoulders, and when he beheld her in the low-bodied dress which revealed not merely those full, plump shoulders in all their dazzling whiteness, but likewise all the upper part of the grand volume of the bust, he felt that the joys he was about to experience were not too dearly purchased even at the cost of one hundred thousand pounds.

Venetia still resisted him not, but she fixed her eyes upon him with a look so deprecating, so martyrized, so full of mournful entreaty, that if there had been any generosity in his nature he would have relented, yes, he would have relented; and though that splendid creature was, after all, but the courtesan of royalty, and had not a particle of virtue to lose, he would nevertheless have forborne from taking an advantage which to her had all the poignancy of a sacrifice and an immolation.

"And it is thus, Venetia," he said, gazing upon her with looks which, while gloating with a satyr's devouring lustfulness on her charms, were also filled with the radiant satisfaction of triumph, "it is thus that you have come to surrender yourself at discretion? But, my charmer, you must expect no mercy at my hands. In the warfares of love there can be no mercy shown. Inexorable have you been to all the endeavours which I have previously made to win you to my arms, and now I must prove equally inexorable toward you."

"Is it revenge, then, my lord, that you are wreaking upon me?" asked Venetia, in a low voice full of a plaintive melody, "or is it love which, after your own fashion, you mean to bestow upon me?"

"Oh, if I thought that you would be all kindness to me, then assuredly should I be all that is loving and tender and affectionate toward you. But," continued the marquis, with a slight accentuation of bitterness, "when you come to me cold as marble a statue, receiving my caresses as if you were

a being chiseled from a block of ice, allowing me to fling my arms around your neck, but not even so much as pressing my hand in return, what can I think? Why, that you have but made a convenience of the Marquis of Leveson. You accepted me as your banker, but you never, never intended that this should be the result. Even until the last day, I might even say until the last hour, — for it is but a couple of hours since you were here, — you declared, with a glorious smile of triumph upon your countenance, that the last pearl should never find its way back into my possession. Well, then, Venetia, you would have robbed — "

" Robbed, my lord? " she ejaculated, the flush of indignation mantling upon her cheeks, and the same sentiment flashing in fire from her eyes.

" Tell me candidly, Lady Sackville, had you remained at the ninety-nine thousand pounds, as you have all along intended to do," demanded the marquis, " would it not have been the cruelest, the unhandsomest, the unfairest advantage ever taken of a compact which all along could have had but one meaning, and that meaning significant enough? It would, in plain terms, have been what I denominated it, a robbery. I know not what circumstance may have transpired to compel you to pay me this second visit to-day, and to present me with the last pearl, but this I do know, — and most mortifying to my pride would it be, were it not the very symbol of my triumph, — that it is nought but some urgent necessity that has driven you to an extreme you all along intended to avoid. Here at the last, then, yes, at the very last, am I still your convenience, and in surrendering yourself under such circumstances, you have not the generosity — I will not say the gratitude — even to affect some little warmth toward the man who has made so enormous a sacrifice to obtain you."

" In this case," said Venetia, glad of an opportunity to argue the question, as it might furnish some avenue of escape, " you are influenced by revenge, and not by love, in sternly insisting upon the fulfilment of the compact this night? Ah! my lord," she continued, flinging upon him one of her most winning and seductive looks, at the same time taking his hand and seeming to play with it mechanically between both her own, " why not endeavour, by those tender assiduities which are so acceptable and so flattering unto our

sex, to win that love on my part which would render me warm, ay, even glowing and impassioned, toward you, instead of my displaying this frozen demeanour of which you complain? "

"Ah, Venetia!" cried the marquis, passing his hand over her polished shoulders, and then toying with the tresses of glossy auburn which fell upon those shoulders of alabaster polish, "I know full well all the sophistries of which your tongue is capable. But listen, I have a proposition to make to you, and if you accept it, never again will you experience the slightest embarrassment in a financial point of view."

"A proposition!" echoed Venetia, with all the eagerness of hope. "Name it, my lord, name it."

"Become my mistress altogether," replied the marquis. "Leave the prince, abandon your husband, and I will forthwith transport you to Leveson Hall in Buckinghamshire, where you shall dwell the queen of that vast domain, with a suitable revenue — "

"Oh, this is most kind, most generous, most noble on your part," exclaimed Venetia, affecting an enthusiastic gratitude. "But give me a short time to reflect upon the proposition — "

"Dearest Venetia," interrupted the marquis, at once penetrating through the perfidiousness of her intent, "you can take a day, or a week, to deliberate, if you choose."

"Ah! now indeed you overwhelm me with your generosity," cried Lady Sackville. "Give me, then, the notes for that last pearl, and lend me an additional five hundred guineas."

"Assuredly," answered the noblemen; and, producing his pocketbook, he at once drew forth the amount, which he happened to have about him.

"A thousand, thousand thanks, my dear lord," said Lady Sackville, securing the notes about her person. "Now, then," she added, rising from the sofa with an air of amiable assurance, "you will allow me to depart, and to-morrow evening I will send your lordship my decision respecting the generous, the flattering, and the tempting proposal you have made me."

"Be it so with regard to your decision, my dear Venetia," rejoined the marquis, with a look half-malicious and half-ironical, which had the effect of at once annihilating the

hope Venetia experienced, " but that can make no difference with regard to the fulfilment of our compact to-night."

Lady Sackville answered not a word. She saw at once that her duplicity was penetrated, that her artifice was seen through, and she blushed deeply with the confusion which assailed her, subduing all her wonted fortitude and rendering her powerless for the use of further argument.

" You are mine, Venetia, you are mine," resumed the marquis, throwing one arm around her neck and gazing with devouring eyes upon the features that seemed at the instant all the handsomer in the confusion of the blush which mantled on them. " Think you for a single moment that after the sacrifices I have made to obtain you I should be so contemptible an idiot, so wretched a madman, so flagrant a dolt, as to suffer any postponement of that joy which is now within my reach? I have made you a proposition, and if you like to accept it my travelling-carriage shall be ordered, and away will we speed to Leveson Hall. But if, on the other hand, you decline that proposition, or choose to defer a positive answer upon the subject, then must you be mine to-night, — mine at once."

As the marquis thus spoke, Venetia saw that his passions were kindled to an overpowering degree, and there was something hideous in that old man, so made up of artificialities as he was, now exhibiting all the gloating licentiousness of a satyr. But still she veiled as well as she was able, and with a mighty effort, the outward manifestation of her feelings, for she resolved that if she must succumb, she would not afford him reason to believe that he had consummated a mighty vengeance as well as a signal triumph.

" As I have already said, my lord," she observed, " I am at your mercy. I surrender at discretion."

" Then come this way — this way," said the marquis, in the hurry of excitement, and he led her toward the door that opened into the private suite of apartments.

" Wherefore into those rooms? " she asked, now drawing herself up with a look of haughty remonstrance.

" Not into the gallery, my dearest creature," responded the marquis, with a salacious look. " With you as my companion, there is no need for such artificial excitement as that. It is to a private chamber that we repair by this means of communication, for surely you would not wish to

pass forth from the drawing-room and across the landing outside, at the risk of being observed and recognized by any one loitering there? "

" No," interrupted Venetia, " you are right. I am prepared to accompany you," and as she thus spoke she felt so completely as a victim and a martyr that she thought within herself if ever an opportunity should arise to furnish her with the means of a bitter revenge, she would not hesitate to wreak it, for although she had received the price for the surrender of her charms, yet did she more than ever loathe, abhor, and hate the man who now insisted upon the fulfilment of the bargain.

Taking a key from his pocket, the Marquis of Leveson opened the door leading into the first room of the suite, and carrying a candle in his hand, he entered in company with Venetia. Having paused for a moment to fasten the door again, he led on into the next apartment, which, as the reader will recollect, was the one containing the mechanical chairs.

But at the very moment that he and Venetia crossed the threshold of this room, they were both smitten with amazement and dismay on beholding one of the chairs occupied by an individual whom they at once recognized to be Daniel Coffin, the Hangman.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRIVATE APARTMENTS

Since a very early hour in the morning had the public executioner been held a captive there, and it is probable that he would have already sunk into the stupor of exhaustion, through hunger and thirst and the fearful but unavailing struggles he had made to extricate himself, were it not that a terrible excitement kept all his vital energies in the fullest play. It is, however, impossible to conceive anything in the shape of a human countenance more hideous than his features now appeared to be. They seemed as if some goading anguish had fastened upon his very heart's core. A fierce and unnatural light, vibrating and reptile-like, shone in his eyes, indicating the feverish rage of wild and diabolic passions; his cheeks, sallow in hue, were sunken and hollow; and all the lower part of his countenance, through being unshaven, had that dark appearance which added to the savage ferocity of his mien. His hat lay upon the carpet, his hair was matted together with the perspiration that had oozed forth in the desperate but vain efforts he had made to release himself, and altogether he presented to the view as hideous and revolting a spectacle as ever wore the human shape.

He at once recognized the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Sackville. The latter he had frequently seen riding in her carriage, for be it remembered that although he had even been in her company once before, in this very same suite of rooms, — on the occasion when Sir Douglas Huntingdon had procured his attendance there, — yet Venetia had then her veil thickly folded over her face, so that the Hangman had recognized her not. But now, on this present occasion, she had no veil to conceal her features, her bonnet and shawl

had been left in the Crimson Drawing-room, and the Hangman at once perceived that it was none other than the brilliant Lady Sackville who was accompanying the Marquis of Leveson to that suite of rooms to which he would have dared conduct no lady save for the purpose of gallantry and intrigue.

As for Venetia herself, she was at once so amazed, so confounded, on beholding this dreadful man seated captive in one of the chairs, that she had no presence of mind to avert her head, much less to retreat and thus avoid recognition. A similar suspension of all the powers of volition nailed the marquis to the spot, rendering him unmindful of the fact that the honour of Venetia was suddenly compromised to a fearful extent, and, indeed, depriving him for the moment of all power to think or act.

But suddenly starting, as it were, into the keenest consciousness of her position, Venetia gave vent to a cry, and hastily retreating, threw herself upon a sofa in the first room of the suite, and out of sight of the terrible Hangman. At the same moment the Marquis of Leveson, recovering his presence of mind, advanced close up to the ruffian, saying, in a stern voice, but with a look denoting the most highly wrought curiosity, " What in Heaven's name brought you hither? "

" My own cursed folly, I should think," was Daniel Coffin's savage reply. " But come, make haste and let me loose, my lord, or, by Satan, it'll be the worse for somebody before I've done."

" Stop one moment," said the marquis. " What guarantee will you give me — But do you know that lady? "

" Bless you, I know her well enough. All the world knows her," responded the Hangman. " But it's no business of mine if she chooses to come here with your lordship. Let me loose, and that's all I care about."

" Well, but how came you here? " reiterated the marquis. " I must have an answer to that question."

" Why, in plain terms, I paid your precious niece a visit," answered Coffin, " and she, enticing me here, flung me into the chair. It is a deuced good lark — Ah! ah! " and he affected to chuckle good-humouredly, " though rather a trying condition for a fellow to be in. But, however, just let me loose."

The marquis had no inclination to prolong this interview. He was anxious to be alone again with Venetia, and he was unwilling that she should hear anything more disparaging than she already knew relative to Ernestina. He accordingly at once touched the spring which governed the hidden mechanism of the chair, and the Hangman rose slowly and painfully from his seat. But so fearfully cramped were his limbs that he fell down upon the carpet.

"Are you ill? What is the matter?" demanded Lord Leveson, seriously alarmed.

"Oh, I shall be all right in a minute or two," growled the Hangman, stretching his arms and legs as he lay with his back upon the carpet. "But it's enough to make a man feel queer after being held tight in that cursed contrivance of yours ever since about two o'clock this morning — I don't mean the middle of the day, mind, but the middle of the night."

"Have you been there so long?" said the marquis. Then, making the fellow a sign of intelligence as he caught his eye, he said, "But you need not enter into particulars now. Another time you shall tell me the whole grievance, for which I shall, however, remunerate you at once. Come, let us make a bargain."

"Oh, well, I am open to that," observed the Hangman, now slowly rising from the floor, but still with much painful difficulty. "What's the bargain about?"

"That you forget you have seen anybody here with me this evening," answered the marquis. "Will a hundred guineas seal your lips in that respect?"

"Make it two, my lord," said the Hangman, "for, by Satan! I want some good kind of grease to rub upon these cramped limbs of mine, and there's none better that I know of than money."

"Here are two bank-notes for a hundred each," said the marquis. "But now the difficulty is, how to get you out of the house."

"Not a bit," exclaimed the Hangman, sticking his hat upon his head, when he had thrust the bank-notes into his waistcoat pocket. "Just open that secret door in the wall, let me pass through the two rooms there, and when I once reach the staircase I will walk down as bold as brass. If the hall porter or any of your lordship's flunkies ask me who I am —"

" Say that you are a person been to see my valet Brockman," at once suggested the marquis.

" As good an excuse as any, I dare say," returned the Hangman. " So now good evening, my lord."

With these words Daniel Coffin made his exit by the secret door which the Marquis of Leveson had just opened, and which he immediately afterward closed again behind the departing form of the hideous ruffian. Great, too, was the relief which his lordship experienced when the Hangman was no longer in his presence, and he said to himself, " What new trouble is Ernestina involving herself in, and how on earth could this dreadful man have found either the excuse or the means to visit her? "

For a few moments the marquis was so bewildered and perplexed that he felt as if he could not settle his mind to anything until he had sought an explanation from Ernestina; but the recollection that the beautiful Venetia was close at hand speedily absorbed all other considerations, and hastening back to the adjoining room, he found her seated in an apparently half-fainting condition upon the sofa where she had thrown herself.

" Fear nothing, dearest Venetia," said the marquis, " he is gone."

" Oh, the hideous monster," murmured Lady Sackville, affecting to have experienced a far greater shock than she actually had, much though in reality she had been moved by the occurrence, but by pretending to be thus entirely overpowered, as it were, she hoped to excite the compassion of the marquis.

" I feel ill, very ill," she said, closing her eyes, and placing her hand upon her brow.

" Then I will be your nurse, charming creature," said the marquis, and he impressed a fervid kiss upon her lips.

" Oh, my lord, after such a scene as that, will you not take compassion on me? Will you show me no mercy? " she asked, in a tone of plaintive entreaty.

" Permit me, dearest, to assist you to a chamber close at hand, — that chamber," added Lord Leveson, " whither I was about to escort you just now; and there may you prove the most interesting of invalids and I the most attentive of all nurses."

" Ah! this is a cruel mockery, my lord," exclaimed Vene-

tia, slowly raising herself up into a sitting posture and bending her looks reproachfully upon the marquis.

"My sweet lady," replied the nobleman, "admitting that the surprise was great and the consternation overpowering for the moment, yet I do think that a more speedy recovery from such terror and dismay is possible on the part of a lady of your strong mind and well-toned nerves, especially as it is not the first time you have seen the public executioner; but in this very room some months back did he appear as a friend to serve your cause, which at the time was so ably championized by Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

"My lord, you are bitter and sarcastic to a degree," answered Venetia, now resuming the appearance of complete self-possession, and suddenly clothing herself with a look of calm hauteur.

"Venetia, if you have to complain of my manner or tone this evening," rejoined the marquis, "it is you who provoke every word of irony, every syllable of sarcasm, to which I may give utterance. What arts and tricks and duplicities have you not attempted within the short hour that you have been with me this evening, to escape from the fulfilment of our compact? But you accepted the bargain, and it shall be adhered to. There is no Douglas Huntingdon here to defend you now, and the very man," continued the marquis, with a malignant significancy, "who was brought as a witness in your favour, could now be produced as one against you. Ah! I behold a certain gleaming in you eye, and I understand it. You would remind me that you are acquainted with certain things — bad and derogatory enough, God knows! — about Ernestina, those things, in fact, of which Huntingdon spoke when you were here together. But you must not threaten me now, Venetia. For every word that you might utter against my niece, could I proclaim an equivalent scandal in reference to yourself. Besides, we have but one object to keep in view this evening, which is that the beautiful Lady Sackville, the favourite mistress of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, has accepted a hundred thousand pounds from the Marquis of Leveson on a certain condition."

"Which she is now here to fulfil," responded Venetia, bending a proud look upon the marquis, as if making a merit of this surrender of her charms, and even at the very last

asserting the power of one who grants a concession rather than fulfils a compact.

It wanted ten minutes of midnight when Lady Sackville alighted from a hackney-coach at the private entrance to Carlton House, and speeding up the back staircase, she reached her boudoir unobserved by a single soul.

Mrs. Gale was dozing on the sofa, the wax lights were burning on the mantel, and a tray on the table, containing sandwiches and wine, showed that Jessica had supplied refreshments during her lady's absence.

The moment Mrs. Gale heard the door open, she started up, and on beholding Lady Sackville, who, however, had the veil closely drawn down over her features, she glanced toward the timepiece on the mantel, saying, "Ah, well, your ladyship is indeed in good time. I suppose you have brought the money with you?"

"Here it is," replied Venetia, in a voice that sounded strange and hollow, and still she raised not the veil. "Take it, take it, and good night."

Mrs. Gale hastily ran her eye over the bank-notes, to assure herself that the precise sum she had demanded was there. Satisfied on this head, she put on her bonnet, and moving toward the door, said, "Well, my dear lady, I hope we are not going to part bad friends? I am sure I don't want any unpleasantness between us."

"No, there is none, there is none," interrupted Venetia, quickly, "but, for God's sake, leave me. I am tired, I am ill."

"Well, my dear, I certainly won't stay to vex you, for you have behaved well at last," and with these words Mrs. Gale took her departure.

And now, when alone, Venetia flung off her bonnet and shawl, and, wringing her hands with ineffable anguish, she gave way to the wildest ebullition of grief. No wonder was it that she had retained her veil over her features while the old procuress was still present, for she must have felt that they wore an expression of withering agony, an agony powerful enough, one would almost think, to blight and sear every lineament of that proud and brilliant beauty which had been alike her glory and her shame.

Yes, it was indeed to prevent Mrs. Gale from observing

her altered looks that Venetia had continued closely veiled until the woman took her departure; but now giving vent to the full tide of her anguish, she wrung her hands, sobbed bitterly, poured forth floods of tears, and then, burying her face in the cushions of the sofa, endeavoured to stifle the sobs and subdue the convulsive gaspings the sounds of which were too distressing even for her own ears.

CHAPTER VII

THE SUPPER DEVOURER

But Venetia was not the only lady of rank and beauty who on this memorable night experienced the lancinating influence of ineffable woe. At the very time that she was compelled to surrender herself to the embraces of the Marquis of Leveson, this nobleman's niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart, was passing through another phase in her own strange and checkered career.

The reader is already aware that Ernestina had been up the whole of the preceding night, and that during all the earlier portion of the day she was engaged at the villa at Blackheath. It was not till the afternoon that she got back to Leveson House, and then, wearied and worn out in body, and feeling as if all mental energy had abandoned her for ever, she at once sought her bedchamber and retired to rest. A profound slumber soon entranced her, and she slept on tranquilly until a late hour in the evening. When she awoke she found a maid servant seated by the bedside, and lights burning in the room.

"What o'clock it it?" asked Ernestina.

"Half-past nine, my lady," was the response. "His lordship, on hearing that your ladyship had returned and had come up to your room, felt uneasy that you did not descend again, and he accordingly sent me up to attend upon your ladyship."

"Go and procure me some refreshment," said Ernestina. Then suddenly recollecting something, she added, "Give my kind regards to my uncle, say that I feel indisposed, but that if he will step up and see me I should take it as a kindness."

The servant quitted the room, and when Ernestina was

again alone she began to deliberate with herself whether she should reveal to her uncle's ears the tremendous outrage she had experienced from Daniel Coffin, and explain the fearful nature of the punishment which she was inflicting on that man. She felt the necessity of obtaining her uncle's concurrence in this respect, so as to guard against the possibility of any one entering the secret apartments and effecting the liberation of the intended victim. But would her uncle become a party to the infliction of that frightful vengeance? Would he make himself an accomplice in the tremendous process of thus killing a human being by inches within the walls of that house? That was the question. But still, when Ernestina passed in review all the arguments for or against the probable result, she came to the conclusion that her uncle would assist her in avenging so terrific an outrage and leaving the Hangman to his fate. Indeed, it would be impossible to permit so desperate a man to go forth into the world again as her implacable and unrelenting enemy.

Such were Ernestina's reflections during the maid servant's temporary absence from the room, and the result was a determination to tell her uncle everything. But when the domestic reappeared, bearing a tray containing refreshments, Ernestina was informed that the Marquis of Leveson had gone out suddenly and unexpectedly at about seven o'clock and had not yet returned.

The real truth was that the faithful valet Brockman, knowing his lordship to be engaged in the Crimson Drawing-room, or elsewhere, with a lady, had purposely informed the maid servant that he had gone out, and hence the message now delivered by this female dependent to Ernestina.

"In that case," said her ladyship, "I will defer seeing my uncle till the morning. You may now retire, and I shall not need you any more this night."

When again alone, Ernestina began to reflect that, after all, it was perhaps much better her uncle was not at home. If he were, he might have objected to become an accomplice in the infliction of a slow, lingering, and terrible death upon Coffin; he might have insisted on liberating the wretch at all hazards and at any risks.

"But since he has gone out," thought Ernestina, continuing her musings as she sat up in bed to partake of the refreshments which had been brought, "it is most likely he will

spend the entire evening away from home, and not return till a late hour. That he will visit his private suite of apartments to-night is therefore by no means probable, and when to-morrow comes it is to be hoped that the agonies of thirst, the pangs of hunger, and the exhausting efforts of maddened attempts to escape will have consummated the work of death. But when once the deed is done and the wretch shall be no more, my uncle must adopt some means to dispose of the corpse. It will be too late then for him to refuse to assent to the act or become an accessory to its perpetration, and the only thing for him to consider will be the best means of making away with all evidences of the occurrence."

In this strain did Ernestina continue to weigh the results of her vengeance in respect to the Hangman, and gradually the desire began to arise in her mind to satisfy herself that this vengeance was proceeding according to her hopes and expectations. Perhaps the object of her inveterate hatred was already dead? Who could tell how long or how short a period it might take to send a man out of existence by such a process as that? It was not so much the hunger and thirst. Those, she knew full well, might be endured for days and days; but it was the terrible nature of the captivity, the strange and horrible restriction of the person, the fearful crampings of all the limbs, and the wearing, tearing, heart-breaking efforts which a strong man was sure to make in his utter desperation to release himself, — these constituted the exhausting powers that should lead to speedy dissolution. Likely enough, then, did she deem it, that he had already ceased to exist; and the frightful outrage she had experienced made her feel a ferocious desire to gratify her vindictive rage with a view of the cold, inanimate corpse of him who had so terribly abused her. Yes, and for the same reason, too, if he were not yet dead, did her revengeful hate prompt her to go and feast her eyes upon the excruciations, the agonies, and the tortures which the wretch must be suffering.

Thus, in either case, whether he were dead or alive, did the implacability and dark ferocity of her revenge urge her to pay a visit to the room where she had left her victim. Yielding to the influence of this morbid feeling, Lady Ernestina Dysart rose from the couch, and began to put on some of her clothing. She felt refreshed by the hours of tranquil

slumber which she had enjoyed, and invigorated by the food and wine of which she had just partaken. Well fitted, then, was she for the proceedings which she proposed to undertake, but the state of her mind was very far removed from aught at all bordering upon happiness. True, she was released from the one tremendous source of alarm that for a year past had ever been menacingly imminent, namely, the tragedy of the bathroom at the Blackheath villa. But though thus relieved from a sense of danger on that head, was she not now crushed, as it were, by the consciousness of so awful a degradation that, depraved and unprincipled though she were, it was impossible for her to remain callous to that? No, she indeed felt that she was polluted beyond all purification, that she was as loathsome an object in her own esteem as if she had been dragged through the ordeal of all the lowest stews and filthiest brothels with which the metropolis abounds; and if the thought of her beauty now arose in her mind, it was only to make her shudder at the revolting recollection that every charm had been in the possession of the common hangman. Awful and hideous recollection, astounding idea, crucifying thought, enough to stun her senses with dismay, or else goad them to a rabid frenzy!

She was in the midst of resuming her apparel when her ear suddenly caught the sound of some one turning the handle of the door, and she fancied that the maid was coming back, probably to say that the Marquis of Leveson had returned. But quickly did the door open, a form passed as rapidly in, and as the door closed again and the key turned in the lock, a horrible groan came from Ernestina's tongue, and she sank down upon her knees in the presence of the Hangman.

"Ah! the tables are turned now," he said, in a tone of diabolic ferocity, while his hideous countenance glared upon the unhappy woman as if every lineament were menacing of murder.

"O God!" she said, clasping her hands in utter despair, and feeling as if the cold hand of death were already upon her.

"Ah! food, wine!" ejaculated the Hangman, suddenly catching sight of the tray upon a table close by the bed. "Just what I want!" and he was bounding with the rabid eagerness of famine toward the refreshments when, swift

as the startled deer, Ernestina sprang from her knees, swept toward the mantel, and seized the bell-rope.

But at that very instant the Hangman turned and grasped her wrist with such fearful violence that she shrieked out with the pain. Another second, and he would have been too late to prevent her from making the bell ring.

"Silence, and sit down!" he said, with tone and looks of an infernal ferocity. Then, having flung her, as it were, into a chair, he took the towels from the wash-hand-stand and bound her in such a way that she could not rise from the seat.

Ernestina struggled not, and spoke not a word. A fearful terror was upon her. She saw that the man was half-maddened, and capable of any deed of violence, even murder itself; and polluted, degraded, lost even in her own estimation as she was, yet when thus at any moment her death-blow might be dealt, the instinctive clingings to life asserted their power.

"Now you will stay there as long as I like," said the Hangman, speaking with a hyena-like ferocity. "But if you make any noise, this will soon silence you!" and as he spoke he drew forth his sharp clasp-knife, the blade of which had a horrible ghastly appearance that caused the blood to stagnate throughout the unhappy woman's entire being.

Daniel Coffin now sat down at the table, and began to eat and drink with the avidity of a wild beast. The maid servant had placed several dishes upon the tray, in order to tempt Lady Ernestina's appetite, — cold chicken, tongue, pigeon-pie, and jellies, together with sherry and port wine. As a supper there would have been sufficient for six or eight persons, but almost incredible was the inroad which Daniel Coffin made upon the viands. Dish after dish did he attack with the ravenous appetite of one who had been starving for whole days. The cold fowl was picked to the very bones, and even some of these did he crunch and swallow during the devouring process. Of the tongue, which was nearly entire when he thrust his fork into it, did he leave but a few pieces of the fat and tough portions of the root; and as for the pigeon-pie, it disappeared with a proportionate rapidity. This tremendous supper he washed down with the wine, which he drank out of a tumbler, just as if it were mere

water or malt liquor that he thus poured down his capacious throat; and the repast was wound up with the jellies, all of which he disposed of in half a dozen twinklings of the eye.

While the Hangman was engaged in his monster repast, Lady Ernestina Dysart endeavoured to collect her ideas and look her altered position in the face. But this she could not do steadily and deliberately. It was impossible for her to reason with calmness in the presence of this fearful calamity which had overtaken her. Turned indeed were the tables now. There sat the Hangman, her master, having full power of life and death over her, and here was she bound captive and helpless in a chair. What would he do with her? What course did he mean to adopt? What horrors would the implacability of his vengeance suggest? In a word, what was to be her fate? She knew not; and how, in the midst of those icelike shudderings and freezing tremors which passed over her, could she possibly settle her thoughts so as to frame a conjecture upon the awful subject?

"There, that will do for once," said the Hangman, pushing away his plate. Then, as he poured the remains of the wine into the tumbler and surveyed with a grim complacency the various dishes he had emptied, he observed, "This supper is certainly a trifle of compensation for upwards of twenty hours' captivity in that cursed chair, and considering that I hadn't eaten anything since nine o'clock last evening, my fast may be reckoned for at least twenty-five hours."

He then poured the remainder of the wine down his throat, and after smacking his lips, fixed his eyes upon Ernestina.

"Well, and what do you think of yourself now," he continued, "after playing me such a pretty trick? By Jove! it is enough to make one stark, staring mad to think of it. But how do you suppose I got loose?" he demanded, with an ironical grin. "The vices of you aristocrats are often nuts for me to crack somehow or another. To tell the truth, I had pretty well given up all hope, when, lo and behold! the door opens, a light shines in, and who the deuce should make their appearance but your precious uncle and Lady Sackville."

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina, amazement for the moment rising above her terror. "My uncle and Venetia?"

"Ay, that it was," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "What scandalous reprobates you women of quality

are, to be sure! However, a capital thing it was for me that this should have happened to-night, for I do believe I should have been dead before morning. Now, so far from dying or any chance of it, I am in the best possible feather, — two hundred pounds in my pocket, a good supper and a couple of bottles of wine under my waistcoat, and one of the handsomest women of the aristocracy for my mistress."

Ernestina gave a sudden start and a faint cry as these last words, so full of terrible menace, smote her ears; but feeling the next instant how utterly powerless she was, she sank back in the chair with a low, deep moan, and her head fell forward upon the luxuriant volume of her naked bosom.

"It's above an hour and a half ago that I was let loose from that cursed chair," resumed the Hangman, "and I meant to come straight up to this room at once, but I heard some one about on the stairs, so I just slipped into another chamber, the first that was handy, and, locking myself in, laid down on the bed a bit, for I was regularly tired out. However, when I had done my nap, I found my way to your room, and here I am safe and sound. But I suppose," he added, with another grin and ironical leer, "you can't guess why I am sitting here chattering to you in this familiar style? In the first place, it's because this wine has put me into a little better humour than I was just now; and, in the second place, because you are my mistress, and so I want to put ourselves on an intimate and comfortable footing together."

Ernestina's countenance grew haggard and ghastly to a degree as the public executioner thus spoke; and as she raised her eyes in mingled entreaty, horror, and uncertainty toward him, all the intensity of her varied feelings was depicted with a frightful eloquence in her looks.

"Well, and what are you thinking of, then?" he demanded, with brutal abruptness. "You must not give way to regret and so on, or else it will spoil your beauty. And mind, yours is a beauty of which I shall be very proud when I introduce you to all my particular friends."

"Eternal God!" shrieked Lady Ernestina, suddenly shaking herself in a paroxysm of hysterical frenzy, "is it possible that all this can be true, that I hear aright?"

"True? Of course it is. Why the devil shouldn't it be? But come, I will give you a proof of my love and affection."

Thus speaking, and with a horrible chuckling laugh, the

Hangman, who was somewhat under the influence of the two bottles of wine which he had drunk, rose from his chair, accosted Ernestina, and stooping down, began covering her face with kisses. She struggled, O heavens! she struggled as if it were a huge boa-constrictor that was thus slobbering her with its forked tongue previous to the process of deglutition; but she was so bound in the chair and her arms were secured in such a manner that she could afford no effectual resistance, and as to screaming out, her powers of utterance were either absorbed in the horror of her feelings, or else the few stifled cries which might perhaps have found vent were kept down by the brutal kisses of the monster.

"Now, don't you think I am an affectionate kind of fellow?" he asked. "But come, it's time we should be off," and with these words he loosened the towels which held her ladyship in the chair.

Panting and gasping from the half-smothering effects of the caresses he had bestowed upon her, and with a deep inward sense of self-loathing, wretched, too, oh, wretched beyond all possibility of description, Ernestina had scarcely consciousness or energy left to think at all. But when the ruffian bade her rise, with an intimation that she was to depart in his company, she looked up into his face in a manner of anxious inquiry.

"Well, I suppose I spoke intelligibly enough," he growlingly observed, "and if not, I can soon make you understand. You are going away with me to be my mistress, to live with me, — no, not exactly to live with me, 'cause why, it wouldn't do to take you to the same house where Sally Melmoth is. But I will put you into a nice comfortable lodging over in Bermondsey."

"Monster, wretch, villain!" exclaimed Ernestina, now starting from the chair to which she was no longer bound, "let this scene end at once."

"Well, then, it will end in this manner," cried the Hangman, snatching up his clasp-knife from the table and raising the ghastly, gleaming blade above Ernestina's head.

"Mercy, mercy!" she ejaculated, falling upon her knees, for there was something frightful in the aspect of that hideous knife.

"Now listen, while I say just a few last words," exclaimed Coffin.

"Last words?" repeated Ernestina, trembling all over as she knelt before him, for it struck her that this phrase was indicative of her doom.

"You are a fool. I don't want to hurt you, unless you make me," resumed the Hangman. "But what I mean to say is just simply this. Twice have you done your best to make an end of me, once when you thought you was sticking a dagger into me on Westminster Bridge, and last night, or, rather, this morning, when you shoved me into the chair. If I didn't mean to be revenged, I shouldn't be flesh and blood. But I do mean revenge, and that is by making you my mistress. Or else I will send every inch of this blade through that lovely bosom of yours, down into your very heart. So now decide."

Ernestina remained upon her knees, but with her hands no longer outstretched or her looks upraised. Her arms fell before her, and her head drooped on her bosom, giving her the air of a kneeling penitent. She was abandoning herself to despair, the stupor of dismay was coming over her; her ideas were growing confused, her senses seemed to be leaving her.

"Now, then, get up, dress yourself, and let us depart," said the Hangman.

But no response was given him, and the unhappy lady, already upon her knees, fell with her face downward upon the floor, where she lay senseless.

When she awoke to consciousness again, she was lying on the bed, and the Hangman was sprinkling water on her face. A conviction that she had experienced fresh outrage struck her as if with a death-blow.

"You are killing me, I am dying," she murmured, in a faint voice, but still there was an expression of ineffable horror in her looks as she averted them from the Hangman's countenance.

"Oh, that's all nonsense," he exclaimed. "Women don't die like this. Besides, you are young and strong and healthy enough. If it was the prince that was with you, you wouldn't be dying with anything, unless it was pleasure, but because a genelman of my profession has took a fancy to you —"

"Oh, if you have any compassion left, if you have any feeling in your heart," moaned the wretched Ernestina, "leave me. I am dying."

The Hangman grew frightened. Even while Ernestina was giving faint and feeble utterance to these last words, he was struck by the visible change which had come over her, and there was also something that alarmed him in the tone of her voice. Yet he was undecided how to act. To leave her then and there was to abandon the vengeance which he had resolved to wreak, and how could he give up all idea of revenge for what he considered to be the wrongs he had experienced? That he was already sufficiently avenged by the brutal outrages perpetrated on the unhappy lady, he did not think. He sought to drag her through all the mire, pollution, and filth of a brothel in Bermondsey, for it was only by the consummate degradation of the high-born, titled, and beautiful lady that his fiendish malice and diabolic vindictiveness could be appeased.

While he was standing by the side of the couch, uncertain how to act, Ernestina had averted her countenance, and shading her eyes with one of her white hands, she lay as if in extremities, her breath coming with quick, uneasy gaspings, and all the lower part of her countenance looking as if the seal of death were already impressed upon it.

"Come, now, what does this mean?" demanded the Hangman, gruffly, endeavouring, as it were, to conceal his fears even from himself beneath a display of his savage temper. "What's the matter with you?"

"I tell you I am dying," answered Ernestina, in a voice that was scarcely audible. "Heavens! will you not suffer me to die in peace?"

Daniel Coffin was now too seriously alarmed to permit him to remain undecided any longer; and thinking that the best course he could adopt would be to take his departure as promptly as possible, he without another word snatched up his hat, flung it upon his head, and stole forth from the room. Descending the stairs, he boldly traversed the hall, and the moment the porter emerged from his great leathern sentry-box in which he was wont to sit and doze, Coffin said, "I'm a friend of Mr. Brockman's."

The porter recollected having seen the Hangman before, but still he could not help gazing suspiciously upon him. Coffin accordingly drew the crowbar out of his pocket, and gave the domestic a tap on the head which at once stretched him senseless on the marble floor of the hall.

The Hangman escaped from the house without any further molestation, and several minutes elapsed before the hall porter came to himself. He then raised an alarm that some robber had been in the house, and as the servants rushed about in all directions, the maid appointed to wait on Ernestina sped to her room. There she found her ladyship dangerously ill; but nothing could equal the young woman's amazement when she beheld the dishes completely cleared and the decanters emptied.

" Heavens! the robbers have been here! " she exclaimed, in surprise and alarm.

Lady Ernestina Dysart, now recovering partially, and perceiving the necessity of telling some tale, at once corroborated the maid's belief, representing that she had fallen into a swoon on discovering a robber in her room, and that she was only now beginning to shake off the effects of the terrific fright she had sustained.

In this manner was not only the absence of the supper accounted for, but likewise the serious illness which Lady Ernestina experienced.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION OF THE HISTORY OF SELLIS

THE scene shifts once more to Windsor Castle, and it is the same evening of which we have been writing.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Bredalbane, occupying the post of one of the royal bedchamber women, and if we peep into this lady's own room in the castellated palace, at about ten o'clock, we shall find her seated *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Arbuthnot, who held a similar appointment. These two ladies had become great friends and confidantes, and when not required to be in personal attendance on the queen, they were wont to have a cup of tea or a pleasant little supper together, in order to discuss all the scandal of the palace.

On the present occasion they were seated at the supper-table. The repast was over, but they were enjoying themselves with a glass of liqueur, while indulging in some of their favourite topics of discourse.

"Yes, my dear friend," said Mrs. Bredalbane, pursuing the thread of some previous remarks which she had been making, "I can assure you the princess persecutes me to death upon this subject; and that is what you beheld her talking to me so earnestly about in the park this morning."

"But how is it," inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that her Royal Highness should be so anxious to learn the history of Sellis's mysterious death?"

"You might say murder, if you chose," observed Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Indeed! are you so positive on that head?" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I am," was the response. "Of all the topics whereon

you and I have so frequently conversed, I do believe that the Sellis business is the only one left untouched by us — "

" And it is precisely that which has suddenly assumed an important degree of interest in my eyes," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, " after what you have told me relative to the young Princess Charlotte. But how came her Royal Highness to be aware that you, of all the ladies at court, were better instructed in this mysterious transaction than any one else? "

" I will tell you how it happened," said Mrs. Bredalbane. " Poor dear Lady Prescott, whose melancholy death at Geneva has so recently appeared in the papers, was a bosom friend of mine, and one evening we were talking familiarly together, in the same way as you and I at the present moment. The conversation turned upon the Sellis affair, and I was induced to commence the narrative of the dread occurrence. Little suspecting who overheard me, I had nearly finished the recital, when all of a sudden the astounding fact became revealed to us that the Princess Charlotte was a listener; and, as she subsequently confessed, she had caught every syllable, — that is to say, as far as I had advanced in the narrative."

" Dear me, how very awkward! " exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. " Was that long ago? "

" Yes, some months, just before Lady Prescott resigned and was succeeded by you. From that moment has the princess constantly plagued and persecuted me to tell her the remainder of the narrative, but it is of a nature which, strictly speaking, cannot possibly be revealed to so young a person."

" Is it, then, of so very peculiar a character? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a display of curiosity that was significant enough.

" Ah! my dear friend, if you only heard it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, " you would indeed agree with me that I cannot, must not, dare not comply with the young princess's request. I have accordingly managed to put her off from time to time with a variety of excuses, but this morning she told me frankly enough she did not think that I intended to fulfil my promise at all. That was when you saw her looking so cross, firing up, indeed, in her truly royal manner," added Mrs. Bredalbane, whose head was filled

with courtly ideas to which her tongue could only give utterance in a courtly sense. "But, after all, she is a sweet, good-natured princess, and if she were not a princess, we should speak of her as a most amiable creature."

"But this story of Sellis?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Come, my dear friend, I do not suppose that you have any reserve with me?"

"Very far from it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "It would indeed be very wrong of me to keep any secrets from you, after the implicit confidence which you have placed in me. Not but that I should have penetrated the intimacy subsisting between your charming daughter Penelope and the prince, even if you had not whispered in my ear that such an intimacy did really exist. But if Penelope should prove in the family way, as you fear — "

"Fear is not perhaps exactly the word, my good friend," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "because the existence of issue from this amour would always prove a sort of tie — You understand me?" she observed, significantly.

"Without a doubt," answered Mrs. Bredalbane, "and I do not know which to admire the most, the truly woman of the world way in which you take your daughter's connection with the prince, or the precision with which you estimate the results. Ah! my dear friend, I have seen so many, many strange things within these walls. But, while I think of it, let me observe that if Penelope should prove with child, I can recommend an excellent and trustworthy female, at whose house she can go into retirement — "

"A thousand thanks for the interest you take in the matter," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But pray do let me bring back your attention to that topic which for the present moment has an absorbing interest for me, — I mean the affair of Sellis."

"Well, then, I will give you that narrative," answered Mrs. Bredalbane. "You are well aware that the transaction took place during the night between the 31st of May and the 1st of June, 1810, therefore upwards of five years ago. The Duke of Cumberland was then living, as he is now, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. He had three valets, Neale, Sellis, and Joux. The first-mentioned was an Englishman, the second an Italian, and the third a Frenchman. Neale was a very ordinary-looking person; Sellis was a

dark-complexioned and rather handsome man; Joux was thin and pale-faced, neatly made, and admirably fitted for a valet. Sellis was an excellent man, quiet, but cheerful, by no means forward in his manners, never excited nor yet dispirited, but always preserving an equanimity of temper. He was married and had four children, his family being accommodated with lodgings over the gateway leading from Cleveland Row into the Kitchen Court. He had also his own room in the close vicinage of the duke's suite of apartments, and, if you can understand me, there was a passage leading from this room to the duke's bedchamber, and another passage leading into the lodgings over the gateway. Adjoining the duke's room was the one occupied by Neale when on duty."

"I understand perfectly," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Pray proceed."

"It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the 31st of May," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that Sellis repaired to Neale's room for the purpose of saying something to him. They were accustomed, with the familiarity usually subsisting between dependents in the same household, to enter each other's rooms at any time without the ceremony of knocking; and therefore on this occasion of which I am speaking, Sellis entered Neale's apartment without any warning. But he at once beheld something which made him start back in dismay, and give vent to the exclamation of 'Heavens! the Princess Augusta!' Flying along the passage, back to his own room, Sellis ran against Joux, who happened to be there at the moment and who heard with much astonishment the singular ejaculation which burst from his lips. He was equally surprised at Sellis's hasty and confused manner, and the more so when with a strange wildness of look he said to him, 'You cannot possibly go to Neale's room, for he is engaged.' He then took Joux along with him into his lodgings, and kept him in conversation for about an hour. Joux then retired, naturally wondering at the incident which I have described, but of which Sellis volunteered not the least explanation, nor even alluded to it in the presence of his wife. As one of Sellis's children was ill and it was arranged that the little invalid should sleep with its mother, Sellis had decided upon passing the night in his own room belonging to the ducal suite of apartments. Accordingly, at ten o'clock

on that memorable night, he embraced his wife and children with his wonted affection, and then retired to his chamber."

The Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane paused for a few moments to replenish her glass of liqueur, an example which Mrs. Arbuthnot readily followed, and this being done, the former lady resumed her narrative in the ensuing terms:

"It was half-past two in the morning, when the cry of murder rang through that portion of St. James's Palace. All was speedily confusion and alarm. The Duke of Cumberland was in his nightshirt, covered with blood, Neale was with him, and in a very short time all the domestics were aroused from their beds. Joux was one of the first to speed to the duke's chamber, and it was he who was also the first to discover that Sellis was no more. It appears that on hastening to call the Italian, Joux was horror-stricken on finding the unfortunate man lying on the bed with his throat cut from ear to ear, — indeed, in so horrible a manner that his head was all but severed from his body. Advancing nearer to the couch, Joux presently observed a sheet of paper lying on the floor. It was a partially finished letter, in the handwriting of Sellis, and being in the shade of a chest of drawers, from which it had evidently fallen, it might easily have escaped the superficial notice of any one entering that room. Indeed, Joux himself had not remarked it until looking more attentively about the scene of horror, so that it is not to be wondered at if it failed to catch the eyes of the murderer in the hurry, confusion, and excitement necessarily attendant on the perpetration of so appalling a crime. Joux hastily ran his eye over the first few lines, and these were to him a sudden revelation. He understood it all, but finding himself thus in a single moment the possessor of a fearful secret, he felt an unknown terror come over him. It seemed as if a warning voice whispered in his ear, 'Take heed lest you share the same fate!' For he saw in an instant that Sellis had been murdered on account of this same secret which had just come into his possession; and as he beheld the awful spectacle of the butchered Italian stretched before him, an ice-chill struck to his heart with a presentiment of what his own doom might be. Hastily thrusting, therefore, the letter into his pocket, he was induced by his terrors to place a seal upon his lips. You may rest assured that he sought the earliest opportunity to lock himself up in his own

room and read the letter which accident had placed in his possession. I will now show you that document itself."

"What, the very letter!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, in astonishment. "Is it in your possession?"

"It is," was the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane's reply. Then rising from her seat, she fetched her writing-desk from a side-table, and producing a number of papers, searched amongst them for the required document.

This she soon found, and taking it from the envelope in which it was carefully preserved, she handed it to Mrs. Arbuthnot. The writing was in the peculiar cramped hand characterizing foreign penmanship. The lines had evidently been traced under circumstances of considerable excitement, and there was every sign to prove that the letter was merely a draught whence a fair copy was to be made, as there were many erasures, corrections, and interlineations. Indeed, it was by no means an easy task to decipher the writing at all, but at length, with Mrs. Bredalbane's assistance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was enabled to make out the contents in the following manner:

"For my own sake, I must declare that it was through no motive of impertinent curiosity I entered the room just now. Indeed, I had not a suspicion that aught of evil was going on. But, heavens! what did I behold? Yourself and the Princess Augusta in each other's arms, leaving not a doubt as to the criminality of the scene. I am amazed, astounded, horrified. I know not what to do. Without any affectation of sickly sentimentalism, I may be permitted to declare myself a lover of virtue. At all events, my ideas of propriety are such that I have experienced a shock which will never be forgotten. I have dissembled my feelings in the presence of my wife, in the presence of Joux also. I have endeavoured to be calm, but it was the external surface of the volcano, while the fire was agitating within. I am incapable of concealing the true state of my feelings much longer. Henceforth, whenever I might see you, whenever I might behold the Princess Augusta, and whenever, too, I might hear your names mentioned, my countenance would betray the fact that in the deep caverns of my soul a dread secret was deposited. If questioned, especially if pressed by my wife, what could I say? Subterfuge, falsehood — no, no! I hate untruth. Besides, I could not make all the rest of my

life one continuous incessant lie, for the sake of veiling this hideous secret which personally concerns me not. What, then, is to be done? I assuredly do not ever wish to be dragged into a revelation, nor yet be surprised into a betrayal, of this tremendous secret. My only course is to leave St. James's, to seek some other service, and by being thus removed from the presence of those whom this secret so nearly concerns, I may not be forced every day and every hour to find myself blushing or turning pale, and having to invent some falsehood as an excuse for my emotions.

" My mind, therefore, is made up. I shall leave to-morrow. My child's illness will serve as an excuse. The doctor said something to-day about the seaside. This, then, will serve to account for my sudden resolve, a resolve which is now unchangeable.

" If I write to you thus, addressing you by no name, it is that I cannot bring myself to pay even the most ordinary courtesy to one who . . . "

Here the letter abruptly broke off, but it was evident that, so much as there was of it, its contents had produced a deep impression upon Mrs. Arbuthnot's mind.

" What think you of that document? " asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

" Before I offer a single comment," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, " be pleased to finish your narrative," and as she thus spoke, her manner was grave and her look serious to a degree.

" I have but little more to say," continued the Honourable Mrs. Bredalbane. " You may readily suppose that Joux, on perusing this letter, was strangely excited, and if, on the spur of the moment, he had deemed it prudent to abstain from declaring what he knew or producing the document, he was now more than ever confirmed in the adoption of that course. The inquest took place, and, as a matter of course, the evidence, such as it was, had been cooked up so as to have but one tendency, namely, to fix the stigma of self-destruction upon Sellis. A verdict was returned accordingly, and the unfortunate Italian was not only branded as a base, cowardly assassin, the midnight assailant of a kind and benevolent master, but also as a miserable suicide."

" And what about Joux? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

" He managed to keep himself out of the way at the

moment when the evidence of the domestics and others was being taken down in writing, to be ultimately submitted to the coroner's jury, and soon afterward he quitted the service of his Royal Highness. He then entered my household as butler, my husband being at that time alive and our residence in Mount Street. In the course of a short time I observed that Joux had evidently something on his mind, and knowing, of course, that he had been in the service of the Duke of Cumberland, I fancied that he might have picked up some piece of court scandal, or have become a party in some not overnice transaction connected with high life. To these suppositions I was led by a word or two which at times he inadvertently dropped, and at length I pressed him on the subject. He then told me all these particulars relative to Sellis and the letter which I have been describing to you, and which have never been made public. He gave me the letter. He even appeared delighted to get rid of it, and yet he assured me that some superstitious feeling had always prevented him from destroying it whenever he entertained the idea. He left me at length to 'better himself,' as the phrase goes, and I know not what has become of him."

"But what was his opinion relative to the whole affair?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, fixing upon her friend a keen and searching look.

"What could he think, otherwise than that Sellis had discovered an amorous intrigue existing between the Princess Augusta and the valet Neale, and that, fearful of being betrayed and ruined, Neale murdered Sellis, and then, in order to shield himself, penetrated into the Duke of Cumberland's room, wounded his Royal Highness, and fled, of course leaving it to be supposed that Sellis was the assailant."

"And you believe all this relative to Neale?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"To be sure I do," replied Mrs. Bredalbane. "Surely you do not fancy that Joux forged this letter, and that, his whole story a fiction, Sellis was really an intended robber and murderer and an actual suicide?"

"No, I believe every syllable of the story told by Joux," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I also feel convinced that this letter is genuine, though without signature, imperfect, and unfinished. I therefore believe that Sellis was murdered, but I do not believe that Neale was the murderer."

"Good heavens! what do you believe?" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, with a frightened regard.

"Tell me what was the impression that Joux entertained on the subject?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I do not remember that he ever specifically and in so many words explained his opinion," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "He told me the narrative, gave me the letter, and suffered me to draw my own inference, which I did, supposing it to be the same that he himself had already deduced from the facts themselves."

"Depend upon it," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, shaking her head solemnly, "that the impression Joux formed was very different from the one which you, my dear friend, received."

"Good heavens! I begin to entertain a dreadful suspicion," cried Mrs. Bredalbane.

"And my wonder is that you did not entertain it long ago," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Look calmly and dispassionately at all the facts. Why was Joux so overpowered with alarm on discovering the secret? Because he read the frightful truth in a moment. Had he believed Neale, a humble and obscure domestic, to have been the murderer, he would not have feared to proclaim this belief. But it was because he comprehended the whole of that awful mystery —"

"For God's sake, take care of what you say!" interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, casting an anxious glance around, as if the faces of listeners might peer forth from the very walls. Then she rose and looked forth from the door, to satisfy herself that there were no eavesdroppers.

"It is impossible," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, when Mrs. Bredalbane had resumed her seat, "to shut one's eyes against the truth, startling, horrifying, and astounding though it be, which stands forth patent and visible from amidst all the facts before us. The belief that Neale was the murderer involves the clumsiest theory. How could he be ruined and undone because a royal lady bestowed her favours on him? Would she not screen him? Would she not provide for him? Where was the necessity to murder Sellis? Think you that the princess herself would have counselled him to the deed? And then, if your theory makes him the murderer of Sellis, it must make him also the assail-

ant of the duke. But why suppose him committing one unnecessary crime in order to veil another? It would have been an act of sheer madness on Neale's part, and the theory is not tenable for a moment."

"Then who — who — " asked Mrs. Bredalbane, scarcely daring to allow her lips to form the query which all her suspicions now naturally suggested.

"My dear friend, between you and me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "there is not the slightest necessity to mince matters. We are alone, we shall not betray each other, and we may therefore speak without reserve. This, then, is my opinion, my firm opinion, the opinion to which I came while reading Sellis's letter."

"And that opionion?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Is that Ernest, Duke of Cumberland, was guilty of incest with his sister, the Princess Augusta, and was himself the murderer of Sellis."

Such was the answer that Mrs. Arbuthnot gave in a firm and solemn voice, and then a long pause ensued.

"Yes, it must be so," said Mrs. Bredalbane, at length breaking silence and speaking in a musing tone. "I comprehend it all now. That letter was intended to have been sent to the Duke of Cumberland, whereas until this night I have always imagined that it was meant for Neale. Poor Sellis! he must have been endowed with fine and even noble feelings indeed. That such was the case his letter fully proves."

"And in imagination," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "one may penetrate into the solitude of his chamber on that fearful night. I fancy that I can see him, carried along by a torrent of irresistible feelings excited by the fearful crime of incest which he had witnessed, taking up his pen to give expression to those feelings in a letter to his royal master, that master whom he evidently considered to have forfeited all claim to respect and deference. Then may we imagine him throwing down his pen, perhaps even tossing the paper itself impatiently aside, so that it fell down in the corner where Joux picked it up, and throwing himself, half-dressed as he was, upon the bed, exhausted by the fearful excitement of his overwrought feelings. But ah! now comes the awful phase of the tremendous drama. The door opens, the Duke of Cumberland steals in, Sellis sleeps, and from

that sleep there is to be no waking. The frightful deed is done, and forth from that room goes the duke, a murderer. Ay, and what is more, too, he must have been a cold-blooded assassin, for on his return to his own room, he had the presence of mind to perform the part which was to give a colour and complexion to the whole affair, — I mean those wounds which he must have inflicted upon himself — "

" But the medical evidence," interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, " proved that the wounds were serious."

" Granting that they were," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, " may we not suppose that the duke inflicted them a little more severely than he perhaps intended? Or that, being a bold and desperate man, he calculated full well that the more severely he punished himself the more certain was he to avert suspicion from his own door? Or again, the medical evidence may have been exaggerated and overstrained."

" Is it not an awful subject? " asked Mrs. Bredalbane, as she replaced the unfinished letter of the murdered Sellis in her writing-desk.

" It is a tremendous and a fearful episode in the history of the royal family," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, " and I think that you now will be more than ever cautious how you appease the curiosity of the Princess Charlotte."

CHAPTER IX

THE DOOMED WOMAN

Return we once more to Geneva, the scene of so many and startling incidents already chronicled in our narrative.

It was ten o'clock at night when Jocelyn Loftus rang the bell at the entrance of the gloomy prison. The gate was immediately opened by the porter, who inquired his business.

"I wish to see the Englishwoman named Ranger who is to die to-morrow," was the answer given by our hero.

"It is too late, sir," replied the porter. "The prison hours — "

"Here!" said Loftus, producing a paper from his pocket. "It is an order from the syndics to admit me."

The man glanced his eye over the paper, bowed with much respect, and said, "Have the kindness, sir, to follow me."

Thus speaking, the porter conducted our hero along the gloomy passage, which was dimly lighted by an iron lamp suspended to the ceiling, and turning into another stone corridor he led him into a large room, where a turnkey, two or three of the prison watchmen, and the sergeant of the guard stationed within the walls of the establishment were lounging upon benches, smoking their pipes, and drinking the small wine of the country. The porter gave the written order to the turnkey, who forthwith took up a lantern and requested Jocelyn to accompany him. The porter returned to his lodge at the gate, and our hero followed the turnkey through the apartment into another long passage on the farther side. They then traversed a large courtyard surrounded by the lofty buildings constituting that particular division of the gaol. But in one window only did a light shine.

"That is where the three men are who are to be guillotined

to-morrow along with Mrs. Ranger," said the turnkey. " The priest is with them, for they are all three Catholics, and they are allowed a light in their cell."

" And how do they bear themselves? " asked Loftus, " for I was told yesterday that they are thoroughly reckless and impenitent."

" There! " said the turnkey, " that is a proof," and he drew Jocelyn beneath the barred window of the cell, where they both paused for a few moments.

The three men were singing, not a hymn, but a bacchanalian song; and then suddenly breaking off with a loud laugh, they began flinging taunts and ribald jests at the priest. Then arose, however, the voice of that pious man enjoining them to listen to the words he had to speak, but again they broke forth into a coarse guffaw; and Jocelyn, with a cold tremor passing throughout his frame, whispered to the turnkey, " This is horrible! For Heaven's sake let us move on."

" Think you," asked the prison functionary, as he proceeded to conduct our hero across the yard, " that those men will continue thus until the last? I do not. My experience is against such a belief."

" And I also think," answered Jocelyn, " and indeed I hope, for their own sake, that there was something false, hollow, and unnatural in their dreadful mirth. It sounded like the desperate attempt of men to drown care in a forced excitement."

" Just so," rejoined the turnkey. " But here we are, in the women's division."

While thus speaking, the prison official had opened a door leading into a second courtyard, and here also one light was alone seen shining through the window of a cell on the ground floor. The turnkey opened another door, which led into the building, and conducting our hero along a gloomy passage, where their footsteps raised echoes that had a fearful and ominous sound, he presently stopped at a door through the chinks of which a feeble glimmering shone forth.

" Do you wish to see her alone? " he asked, in a subdued whisper. " Just as you like."

" Yes, alone," replied Loftus. " Is any one with her now? "

" No; she desired the clergyman — for she has a Protes-

tant minister attending upon her — to return at midnight. I shall walk up and down in the passage until you come forth again."

Thus speaking, he drew back the bolts and unfastened the chain of the massive door; the key grated horribly in the lock, and the next moment Jocelyn passed into the cell. The door closed behind him, and he was now alone with Mrs. Ranger.

She was sitting upon the mean and sordid pallet stretched on a rough wooden bedstead. A candle stood upon a small table, and its light, dim and flickering, added to the ghastliness of the wretched woman's appearance. Heavens! how altered was she! The ravages of old age had been fearfully aggravated by the corroding influences of dire anguish and ineffable horror during the last few weeks, and those ravages were no longer disguised by the abundant use of cosmetics and succedaneous artifices. No rouge or pearl-powder or refreshing lotions mitigated or disguised the hideousness of the wretched woman's countenance: her skin was like wrinkled parchment upon her fleshless cheeks; her neck was scraggy and sallow even to loathsomeness; her eyes seemed set in deep caverns. She had either lost, or else no longer chose to wear, her false teeth, and her mouth had therefore fallen in. Her nose was frightfully thin, so that her profile had all the angular sharpness of old age, unredeemed by any of that benevolent or placid expression which at such a time of life so often prevents the countenance from being revoltingly ugly. Her hair still retained the black dye wherewith she had stained it at one of the latest toilets which she performed at the villa; but inasmuch as it had grown somewhat during her imprisonment, it was all perfectly white for about a third of an inch at the roots, a circumstance that added to the hideousness of her appearance. Altogether she seemed the vilest and most loathsome wreck of humanity upon which Jocelyn Loftus ever set his eyes.

The moment he entered the cell he found her looks fixed upon him. She had been gazing at the door while it opened, and there was a species of reptile-like glistening in her sunken eyes. Loftus could not help shuddering as he thus encountered the looks of the wretched woman. When he had last seen her, it was a fortnight back, in the court of justice where she and her three accomplices were tried; but then

she wore a bonnet and was closely veiled, so that he had not on that occasion observed the change which was taking place in her looks. Now he saw her without bonnet, without cap, and without veil, her thin, lank hair hanging down on her scraggy shoulders, and her lean, shrivelled form wrapped in a gown which hung as loosely upon her as if in mockery wrapping a skeleton. He was shocked, he staggered back from the revolting spectacle. He could not conceal his disgust even if it had killed her upon the spot, and she not only noticed his manner but also comprehended the reason of it.

"You find me much changed, Mr. Loftus?" she said; and her voice, no longer aided by the false teeth, was mumbling and almost inarticulate.

"I did not expect to find you looking cheerful and happy," responded our hero, instantly recovering himself and speaking in that gentle tone which was consistent with the generosity of his character, for he would not willingly enhance the pain which he knew full well the wretched woman must experience. "Indeed, I should have been very sorry to find you looking as you were wont to do, because that would have bespoken a hardness of heart which under circumstances —"

"Ah, under circumstances!" she repeated, quickly, and with greater strength of voice than before, as if the anguish of her feelings gave a power to her articulation. "Good God! and what circumstances? Death! death! The guillotine waiting for me — O horror! the guillotine!" and clasping her hands, that were skinny and skeleton-like, she quivered and shook with a convulsive trembling from head to foot.

Jocelyn Loftus placed himself on a stool that was near the table, and said, in a low and agitated voice, "Are you not prepared to die?"

"My God! can you put that question?" she exclaimed, hysterically, and her eyes actually glared from their caverned sockets, which were of a bluish, almost livid tint. "I sent for you to say that you must save me."

Loftus shook his head with mournful slowness.

"Why do you do that?" she demanded, abruptly, and with a short gasp, as if her utterance were nearly choked. "Why do you do that?"

"Can you not understand my meaning?" he said. "I

was told that you were resigned, that you welcomed the visits of the good clergyman whom the authorities have allowed to penetrate to your cell. I had hoped that his pious ministrations had prepared you."

"Oh, if all he says be true, what can I hope, where shall I go?" cried the wretched woman, her attenuated form again shaken by a convulsive shudder. "He speaks to me of heaven and hell, of a heaven full of happiness and a hell formed of a burning lake — ah! and I have seen it in my dreams, too. Oh, the fierce flames, the molten fire, the raging sea of red-hot brimstone!"

"But the minister has likewise told you that God is merciful, and that there is hope for the penitent?" said Loftus.

"Yes; but what surety have I that crimes like mine can be forgiven? Murder! Oh, it is the foulest, the most horrible of all black deeds. The blood of the victim sticks to one; all I see is blood-red. I behold you now through a crimson mist. It is horrible, horrible!" and the wretched woman covered her eyes with her fleshless hands, the veins of which were like knotted cords underneath the skin.

Jocelyn felt assured that her brain was touched, that her senses were impaired. He knew not what to say, or how to deal with the miserable creature under such circumstances.

"Well, what are you doing here," she suddenly exclaimed, removing her hands from her shrivelled countenance, "unless you have come to save me? You have the power — I know you have. A word from you to the syndicate will have the effect. Besides, you must save me. I cannot die, I am not prepared to die. I am old, and could not live long according to my natural span. Surely, surely it would be no great boon to accord me the year or two of existence which in the course of things would be mine. Let me be locked up in prison all the time. I do not ask to go out, but I ask to live. Heavens, I can do no more harm in this world. There is no scope for mischief in this dreadful place. Look around! A strong man in all his youthful vigour could not tear down those huge bars from the windows, nor break open that thick door, nor remove one single stone from the mass of masonry which makes these walls impenetrable as marble. Then, is it rational to fear that a poor, crushed, broken-down, enfeebled wretch like me could escape hence? No, no. Then why take my life? Why?"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Jocelyn Loftus, "I beseech you to tranquillize yourself, and to listen to me. This afternoon a message was left by the Protestant clergyman at the hotel where I am staying, to the effect that you wished to see me, if only for a few moments. I was not within at the time; I did not return to the hotel until an hour ago. It was then nine o'clock. I could not disregard the prayer of a fellow creature whose hours in this world are numbered."

"But why enter into such particulars?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, impatiently. "These things are trivial, oh, trivial to a degree, in comparison with the immense importance of my position. Let us talk, then, only on what can be done to save me."

"I pray you to listen," continued Loftus, impressively. "I was about to inform you that I went to the principal syndic to beseech a written order to visit you at once. I saw him, and he complied with my request. I asked him if —"

"If what?" demanded the wretched woman, with almost frenzied impatience, for she now guessed what was coming.

"I asked him, I say, whether there was any intention to commute your sentence," continued Loftus, with deepening solemnity of tone, "and he declared that the law must take its course."

"He did not! It is false!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, her features convulsing most hideously with a sort of frenzied rage as she spoke. "You only say this to avoid taking any further trouble in my behalf. You want to see me perish dreadfully on the scaffold. It is you who have done it all. Had you never come to Geneva to interfere with my plans, I should not have been led into the circumstances which have made me what I am and have placed me here. Cruel and heartless that you are, pitiless and implacable, it is you who have hunted me to the very death."

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Loftus, in a mournful tone, "I cannot be angry with one in your condition. But you must recollect that you prepared all this sad destiny for yourself. Wherefore did you ever embark in a course which was likely to conduct you, you knew not whither? But God forbid that I should reproach you now. Great as your sins have been, your punishment is also great, — great enough indeed, I hope, to be an atonement, but it is my duty to assure you that with the affairs of earth you have no further concern."

" Oh, forgive me, forgive me, my dear young man, if I said anything to offend you. I did not mean it. But there are moments when I know not what I say or do; my brain seems to be on fire, it is in a dreadful whirl. But tell me, tell me, that you will yet save me! Think of the horrors of such a death. My God! I shall go wild if I dare contemplate it. Mr. Loftus, you must save me — I cannot die. If they come to take me, I will scratch, I will scream, I will fly at the ruffian men like a tiger-cat. Oh, I will do a mischief! " and she laughed with a horrible frenzy.

" Do you not think that I had better go and fetch the clergyman to you once more? " asked Loftus, cruelly bewildered by this awful scene.

" No, he is of no use to me now," was the wretched woman's quick response. Then she paused, slowly bent down her eyes, and appeared to reflect profoundly. " Many, many years ago," she at length said, — and now she spoke in a strangely altered voice, a voice in which there was a low and mournful pathos, — " a sweet little girl was gamboling and skipping about in a beautiful garden full of fruits and flowers. Let us contemplate that dear innocent child when she was about five or six years old. What blushing roses were upon her cheeks, what lily purity upon her brow! Her dark brown hair flowed in myriads of clusters over her white neck and shoulders. What joy danced in her sunny eyes, what silver peals of mirth rolled forth from her red lips, and how glancingly did her tiny feet trip over the lawn, along the gravel walks, and amidst the parterres of flowers! And that little child, so gay, so innocent, so good, was a fond mother's darling. The mother was a widow, and this child was her treasure and her comfort. Behold that dear, kind mother coming forth from the picturesque cottage to which the garden belongs, and how that child bounds toward her! The butterfly wandering from flower to flower is not more happy than this young child. The melody of birds in the trees of that garden is not more delicious than the music of the child's mirth as its mother receives it with open arms. Oh, what a blissful scene, — innocence in its own appropriate paradise! Mr. Loftus, it is a picture of my own earliest years I am giving you. That child was myself."

As she thus spoke, Mrs. Ranger raised her eyes in a melancholy, oh, so melancholy a manner toward Jocelyn Loftus,

that his heart swelled with emotions, and he felt that the tears were trickling down his cheeks. He saw not the hideous hag before him, lean, wrinkled, and stricken by all the searing woes of age, crime, and calamity; he saw not the cold, cheerless dungeon, with its massive bars, its huge door, its impenetrable walls, its stone pavement, its vaulted roof, and its rough, meagre furniture; but so vividly had the picture which the woman drew been impressed upon his mind that he beheld only that sweet little innocent child she had delineated in so strangely touching a manner, and that garden scene with the picturesque cottage, all of which appeared a romantic and lovely reality to his mind's eye.

"But the scene changes," she went on to say, in a deeper mournfulness of voice. "A dozen years have passed, and in a sumptuously furnished apartment a beautiful young creature of seventeen or eighteen reclines upon a sofa. Yes, she is dazzlingly beautiful. All the evidences of wealth and luxury are about her person and in that apartment. Her dress is splendid: diamonds are upon her hair, pearls encircle her neck, pearls also hang over her naked bosom, and the richest bracelets set off her snow-white arms. The door opens; a powdered lackey enters to ask at what hour this lady will have the carriage. She gives him the required answer. Soon afterward an elegant French lady's-maid appears to bring costly stuffs, lace veils, silks and satins, for the lady's inspection. Milliners and drapers, mercers and jewellers, send their goods or await her orders. One of the most eminent artists of the day comes to receive instructions relative to her portrait. Thus the forenoon is disposed of. Then comes a handsome man in the prime of life, tall, portly, and with a noble bearing. He is one of the proudest peers of England, and this charming creature is his mistress. He is infatuated with her; he worships, he adores her, but he is already married and has a large family, or he would make her his wife. Nevertheless, he testifies his affection by all possible means. His wealth is immense, and he is never wearied of expending his gold to surround his loved one with all the luxuries and elegancies of life, not merely to gratify her slightest whims, but even to anticipate them. He has placed her in a splendid mansion, given her carriages and servants, and heaped upon her all the bounties, the extrava-

gances, and the profusions which the most refined luxury or the stateliest pomp could possibly require.

" But she does not love him in return. She never loved him. For her fall from innocence there is not even the apology of the heart's affection. She was dazzled only by his lofty rank, his boundless wealth, and the golden promises he made her. Thoughtless and giddy, notwithstanding the admirable training which she had received under a fond mother's care, she preferred to be a proud peer's mistress rather than a poor man's bride. She was dwelling in the country when he spoke to her of the grandeur of the metropolis; the simple enjoyments of a rural life seemed monotonous to her in comparison with the glowing pleasures associated with the mere name of London. Dazzled and intoxicated by all that was told her and all that she dreamed, excited and enchanted by the words that he spoke and the pictures her imagination drew, she had fallen. Yes, she had fled from her once happy home, and behold her now, the great lord's mistress. But she loved him not.

" Soon, however, she encountered a young man for whom she conceived a passion, and she intrigued with him. One day her noble admirer discovered her infidelity. Immense as his love had been, proportionately implacable was his vengeance now. He dispossessed her of everything he had bestowed upon her. In his rage he tore the jewels from her person, and trampled them under his foot; he then turned her forth from the splendid mansion where he had lodged her, and all in a moment she found herself stripped of every symbol of wealth, flung down from the pinnacle of prosperity, and in the street, homeless and friendless, with but a few guineas in her pocket. Well-nigh broken-hearted, she hastened to the young man whom she loved, and who had been, as it were, the cause of her downfall. But that very morning he had led a bride to the altar, and was away into the country to spend the honeymoon.

" What was the young creature to do now? She was not so thoroughly depraved as to be inaccessible to some of those tender whisperings which the voice of youthful memories breathes upward from the soul in moments such as that. Thoughts of a once happy home came vividly back to her recollection, and to her mind's eye arose the sweet picture of rural simplicity, the garden with its verdure, its gravel

walks, its parterres of flowers, and its lawn in front of the picturesque cottage. Ay, and she thought also of the fond, doting mother whom she had so cruelly abandoned, that widowed mother whose joy and darling and treasure she had been. Back, back, then, to that scene of her childhood, that once cherished spot, that home in a far-off county. But would it be a home to her again, would the door open to receive her, would the widowed mother's arms be unfolded to welcome her? Yes, yes; she at least had that hope. It was a splendid carriage which had borne her away from the cottage to the metropolis: it was the stage-coach now which took the fugitive back again. Pillowed on the breast of an adoring lover had she travelled away from that cottage: alone inside the cheerless public vehicle did she retrace her way thither.

" It was night when she was set down in the road, at the nearest point to the house. She had to walk a mile to reach it. The night was dark; it was the winter season, and the wind sighed amid the skeleton branches of the trees like the voices of the dead. Those sounds seemed full of weird portents to her, and she could hear her heart beat forcibly. Still went she on, and at length the cottage was reached. A light, a solitary light, was shining from a window; it was her mother's chamber. Oh, if she were ill? Heavens! the thought was intolerable, and the unhappy young creature leaned against the garden fence for support. At length she opened the gate and went in. Ah! it was no longer in innocence that she trod that ground where the steps of her childhood had played so glancingly along the gravel walks and amidst the parterres of flowers. It was in guilt, in shame, and in degradation that with feet as heavy as lead she dragged herself to the front door. She knocked, it was opened, and the old servant, who had been for years in the place, uttered an ejaculation so wild and strange that it struck dismay for an instant to the guilty young creature's heart. But the next moment, unable to bear the agonies of suspense, she flew up-stairs, rushed into her mother's chamber, and then stood suddenly transfixed in direst horror at the spectacle which met her view. Dim and sickly was the light which burned in the room, and an old woman was creeping about the bed, performing the last offices of a sick-nurse. But on that bed, O God! was stretched the lifeless

corpse of the broken-hearted mother, and the guilty daughter suddenly gave vent to a thrilling shriek of ineffable anguish, a shriek that rang through floor and ceiling, wall and roof, and pierced the brains of those who heard it. Then she staggered forward a few steps, reeled half-around, and fell heavily."

Here Mrs. Ranger paused again, and covering her face with her withered hands, she sobbed low, but with an inward convulsiveness that denoted a mortal anguish. She had narrated this second chapter in her own sad history, for it was her own tale she was telling, with a mournful evenness and painful continuity of tone, not seeming exactly to address herself to Loftus, nor to have the deliberate intent of unveiling to him the secrets of her earlier life, but rather giving audible expression to the train of recollections which circumstances had now so vividly conjured up. But he listened with the deepest, deepest interest, for it was a tale which no man could hear unmoved. The tears even trickled down his cheeks, and his heart swelled with emotion, for in imagination he saw every feature, every detail, every incident of the woman's history as plainly as if it were being enacted upon a theatre, and he a spectator of the whole drama.

" Years passed away," continued Mrs. Ranger, resuming her audible musings after a deep silence of several minutes, " and during that period many were the vicissitudes which the guilty daughter had known. She had seen the remains of her mother, that mother whom her crime had murdered, deposited in the churchyard. She had seen the damp clay heaped up over the coffin. Some time afterward she had revisited the spot and had seen the grass growing upon the grave. But whenever, in the deep winter's night, she lay awake and heard the winds moaning or sighing or raving without, she thought how cold, oh, how cold that poor mother must be slumbering in her grave. She thought how the rude blasts would howl, and sweep in fury, stern and pitiless, bleak and chill, over the greensward and amid the tombstones in that lone churchyard. It was to avoid such thoughts as these that she plunged headlong into dissipation. She became the mistress of one man, then the mistress of another; sometimes being heartlessly deserted or thrust off by him to whom she surrendered herself, at other times

being detected in intrigue elsewhere, and discarded with bitterest reproaches, perhaps with blows. Sometimes she revelled in luxury, at others she was the occupant of a garret; now sitting down to a sumptuously spread table, and now pledging the last article of her clothing for the wherewith to obtain a morsel of food.

"At length, when living for a brief interval in a somewhat more respectable manner, but upon the gold which she had received as the wages of infamy, she was courted by a worthy man in tolerable circumstances. His name was Ranger. She married him. He thought he was espousing a respectable widow, and he was confiding, indulgent, and happy. Three or four years thus passed, and she endeavoured to avoid those courses which had given her so many, many bitter experiences. But temptation came again. She was still young, still handsome, and in an evil moment she listened to the dishonourable suit of a young nobleman whom chance threw in her way.

"For a brief period this intrigue was carried on without the knowledge of the husband, but at length his suspicion was awakened by something he heard. For he obtained a clue to the former character of his wife; he was thus led to make inquiries, and found, to his horror and dismay, that it was the veriest profligate whom he had espoused. The cast-off mistress of many men, the refuse of lovers too numerous to be easily remembered, the guilty thing whose crimes had broken her mother's heart and sent that fond parent in misery and anguish to a premature grave, — such was the woman whom a respectable man in all trustfulness had taken to his heart, placed at the head of his household, and honoured with his confidence and his love. The exposure was terrific, and expelled, penniless and friendless, from the house of an outraged husband, the wretched creature found herself deserted also by the heartless noble whose fatal love had thus consummated her ruin. Poor Ranger died of a broken heart, another of her victims. But not one single shilling did he leave her in his will. It is true that her name was mentioned there, but in terms of horror and of loathing, yea, and with curses also."

Here the condemned woman paused again. This time she covered not her face with her hands, but clasped them together, agitating them convulsively, shaking her head

with nervous quickness, and giving vent to bitter lamentations expressive of the anguished memories which thus surged up into her almost frenzied brain. Jocelyn Loftus wept not now. He no longer beheld before him either the cherub-child disporting in the garden of flowers, or the betrayed and deluded girl returning home in penitence and sorrow to crave a parent's forgiveness. But he saw before him an inveterate profligate, a vile, dissolute woman, the hideous personification of every gross immorality, a wretch for whom early experiences had no salutary warnings, and who was fitted only to betray all love, all confidence, and break all affectionate hearts. He gazed upon her with a sort of mournful sternness, but she heeded him not, and after another long pause, concluded her narrative in these terms:

" Years and years have passed since Ranger died, and varied and checkered has been the existence of her whom he discarded and who was left behind him. Through all kinds of profligacy has she dragged herself, through a morass of vices, pollutions, and infamies has she floundered on, dissolute in respect to herself so long as the fire of her passions lasted and she could find lovers to share in her obscene pleasures. But such a course made her prematurely old, and as dissipation showed its fearful ravages, she became an object for loathing and disgust, instead of for admiration and love. The healthful bloom faded from her cheeks, her hair, once so redundant in its glorious beauty, grew lank and thin, her teeth fell out, her once splendid bust had become shrivelled into hideousness, her form wasted into a mere collection of bones covered by a wrinkled and sallow skin. Farewell, then, to all the pleasures of voluptuous delight and sensual joy for her, and it was not the least of the punishments which she endured that her desires outlived in fevered frenzy the possibility of gratifying them. But to live — what was she to do for the means of subsistence? Having been the daughter of crime herself, she now became the mother of iniquity. Vile in its hypocrisies as had been her heart, so vile in its artificialities was her person now rendered. Cosmetics and all the falsities of the toilet still made her presentable, if no longer lovable, and she tutored herself to adopt an air and a demeanour suited to her new avocation. Deeply versed in intrigue, but no longer able to intrigue for herself, she intrigued for others.

" Assuming the position of a respectable widow, she secretly became a procuress of the vilest description. Oh, if all the damsels whom she has inveigled into her meshes and betrayed to their ruin could now stand forward and bear witness against her, if all the young virgins whom she has enticed beneath her roof and sold to the polluting embrace of lustful aristocrats and the hoary dignitaries of the Church could now gather here and speak out, and if the tomb could send up all the victims whom her detestable machinations have helped in consigning to it, how many broken hearts would be arrayed as terrible accusers against her! Oh, the vilest brothels, the darkest dens of infamy, have seen no wrongs and beheld no injuries inflicted upon credulous damsels more flagrant than those wrongs and those injuries which she has perpetrated in her time. Ah! was it possible that such a career could glide on tranquilly until the end? Was it natural that a life pursuing its course amidst such matchless infamies could terminate in a peaceful death-bed and in an honoured grave? No, no. I deserve it all. Yes, the Destroyer is approaching. He comes, he comes, arrayed in more than usual terrors; he has put on all his hideousness. The grim skeleton is surrounded by every horror known beyond the grave."

While giving utterance to these last words, the wretched woman started from the pallet, drew herself upright, extended her long lank hands toward one corner of the cell, and fixed her glaring eyes in the same direction, as if she beheld some horrible object stationed there. Loftus likewise rose from his seat, and stepped back a pace or two as he gazed upon the doomed being with indescribable loathing and horror. He could scarcely feel any further pity on her behalf. Such shocking revelations had gushed forth from her lips, like a stream of fetid, putrid feculence, that he could scarcely persuade himself he beheld before him a being possessed of a human heart. She seemed like a fiend in female shape.

" Oh, yes, the reality of my doom is now before me," she cried, in tones of rending anguish. " The scaffold awaits me, the guillotine is raised. But who are you? " she suddenly demanded, her wildly glaring eyes now resting upon Loftus. " Ah! I remember," and she sank back to a sitting posture upon the bed again. " I have been giving vent to

all the memories which arose in my brain," she continued, in a more subdued and deliberate manner, " and you have heard, Mr. Loftus, some shocking things. But think you not that I have been punished enough? Picture to yourself all that I have endured since that dreadful night when you and Baron Bergami seized upon me in my own chamber at the villa, and the terrible sound of Murderess rang in my ears."

" Mrs. Ranger," said our hero, in a low and solemn voice, " I can only repeat the words which I uttered ere now. You have no further concern with the affairs of this life. All the deeds of your past existence have just been revealed to my ears; perhaps this outpouring of confessions may have somewhat relieved your soul. Therefore do I beseech you, fix your thoughts only upon that solemn subject which should now prove all-engrossing — "

" What! " shrieked forth the wretched woman, in the wildness of her despair, " you bid me abandon all hope? No, no, I cannot resign myself thus to die. You must save me, you must save me! "

Loftus shook his head with slow solemnity, saying, " For the last time am I compelled to assure you that you have no hope. And now, farewell."

" Stop one moment," exclaimed the doomed creature. " I wish to ask you a few questions. Oh, do remain but another minute or two, and I will be calm, I will be calm! " she added, with a visible endeavour to subdue her horrified feelings, but she shuddered all over as if an ice-blast had poured in upon her.

" Speak, then, for I must leave you now, so that the clergyman may return."

" Tell me, Mr. Loftus, is not my name mentioned with curses and execrations out-of-doors? " she asked. " Will there not be an immense crowd to-morrow? " and again she shuddered visibly. " Shall I be ill-treated on my way to — to — "

" I think not; indeed, I am certain you have nothing to fear on that head. The police officers will protect you."

" My God, my God! And those three men, are they to die also? Will they be pardoned? "

" No, there is not the slightest chance of that."

" And Doctor Maravelli, what has become of him? " asked

Mrs. Ranger, forcing herself to maintain a calmness which was nevertheless horrible to contemplate, because it was like the surface of ice upon a river in the depths of whose waters hideous monsters and reptiles lurk and agitate.

"Maravelli is expelled the Genevese territory," replied Jocelyn. "There was nothing against him beyond having given his assistance in an illegal manner at the birth of a child, and I had promised to do my best to save him from any serious entanglement with the law."

"And why did you promise him that?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, eagerly.

"Because to a considerable extent he aided some of my plans," replied Loftus. "This I explained to the authorities, and interceded for him. They accordingly considered that justice would be satisfied by his expatriation."

"And will justice then be satisfied with nothing short of my death?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "Can you not, will you not intercede for me?"

"It is useless," returned Jocelyn.

"But do you wish me dead? Is it your desire to hurry me to the scaffold? Do you thirst for my blood?" she demanded, with passionate vehemence.

"Heaven forbid!" was the quick reply. "But I am powerless in the matter. Did it rest with me," he added, solemnly, "I should conceive that justice would be satisfied and outraged society should be content with dooming you to imprisonment for the remainder of your life. Indeed, that you may not carry with you to the grave a false sentiment relative to my feelings, I do not hesitate to declare that I am averse to the punishment of death altogether."

"Then, in the name of God, do something to save me, I conjure you to do something to save me!" and Mrs. Ranger fell upon her knees at his feet, looking up toward his countenance and raising her clasped hands.

"Rise, Mrs. Ranger, rise," he said, in an earnest voice, "for I can allow no human being to kneel to me. Were I a king I would not permit it. Rise, therefore, ere I speak another word."

"To obey you, I do it," she said, slowly raising herself up, and standing before him in all the wretchedness of her physical ugliness and her moral degradation. "There, you see I am obedient. Now —"

" Mrs. Ranger, I solemnly assure you that I appealed to the syndics on your behalf," continued Jocelyn. " I represented that the princess herself, deeply as you had injured her, craved not your life, that Baron Bergami, for whose heart the murderous blow was destined, sought not your death."

" And what was the result? " asked the wretched woman, with an agonized feverishness of impatience.

" There is no hope," returned Jocelyn, solemnly. " The law will take its course."

Mrs. Ranger sank back once more upon the pallet. She seemed confounded; all hope was now evidently crushed within her. She said not a word, and it almost appeared as if the bitterness of death were at this instant passing away. Some portion of her natural strength of mind appeared to revive again, and, half-suppressing a convulsive gasp, she said, " Now do I know the worst. I am astonished that even for a single moment I could have cherished the idea that mercy would be shown me."

Then there was a pause of several minutes, during which the unhappy woman appeared to be looking inwardly, communing with herself.

Jocelyn was most anxious to get away. The scene had altogether been painful beyond description, and though he did not choose to consult his watch, because it would be far too cruelly significant a hint for her how time was passing, yet he could tolerably well conjecture that nearly two hours must have elapsed from the moment he entered that cell. But he still experienced enough compassion for the miserable woman, and, at all events, possessed feelings of too delicate and considerate a nature to hasten away at a moment when such a proceeding would disturb the solemn meditation in which she was engaged.

" Yes, I have now abandoned all hope," said Mrs. Ranger, again breaking silence. " But tell me, — for those who come near me in this dreadful dungeon will give me no information relative to aught that is passing without, — tell me, I say, how fares it with those unhappy girls, Agatha and Julia? God knows I did not mean to cause their sister's death. Alas, poor Emma! "

" Sad and sorrowful is the lesson which the fate of those three young women teaches," answered Loftus. " One,

as you know, already lies in a premature grave, and the other two — "

" Speak, what of them? " demanded Mrs. Ranger, seeing that he hesitated. " Tell me everything. Methinks I shall die more easily if I know the worst in every respect, because my feelings must be relieved from all suspense. Speak, then."

" Yes, for the reason you have set forth, I will answer your question," rejoined Loftus. " Know, then, that Agatha and Julia are the inmates of a madhouse; their senses have abandoned them for ever."

" O God! this is horrible — and yet it is better than death. Mr. Loftus, I am calm now; my soul is nerved to meet my doom. Farewell."

" Farewell, and may Heaven have mercy upon you."

In a few moments the door opened to give Jocelyn Loftus egress from the cell of the doomed woman. The turnkey and the Protestant minister were walking together in the passage, and as our hero issued forth from the dungeon, the reverend pastor went in to give the last consolations of religion to Mrs. Ranger.

As our hero crossed the threshold of the prison gate again and stepped into the street, the church clocks proclaimed the hour of midnight, but the moment the iron tongues of the huge bells in the towers had ceased to beat the air with their deep metallic notes, a smaller bell with sombre tone took up the sound. This was rung by a watchman passing up the street in which the prison was situated, and when he had made his bell clang forth half a dozen consecutive strokes, he said, in a loud but lugubrious voice, " Past midnight! Good people all, pray for the souls of those who are to die in a few hours! "

Jocelyn shuddered, and, quickening his pace, he returned to the Hotel Royal, where he had taken up his quarters since the terrible tragedy at Maravelli's.

CHAPTER X

THE GUILLOTINE

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and brightly shone the sun in a heaven of unclouded azure. Lake Leman never seemed more beautiful, or the Alpine scenery in the distance more sublimely grand. It was a day fitted only for universal rejoicing, and to serve as a holiday to commemorate some happy event. But though the streets of Geneva were crowded to excess, and multitudes were pouring in from all the surrounding districts, yet was it no festive occasion. For there, in the principal square of the republican city, stood a sinister object, and the golden beams of the cloudless sun were reflected in the hideous ax of the guillotine.

Yes, an immense crowd was collected, and the windows, balconies, and roofs of all the dwellings looking upon the spot were put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Pity was it that so many, many young damsels, wearing the picturesque attire of the rural districts or the mountain heights in the neighbourhood, should have donned their Sunday raiment for such an occasion, but so it was. The pretty caps, white as the snow upon the Alpine summits in the distance, and resting upon hair arranged in heavy masses or else in beauteous braids, those bodices laced with coloured ribbons, and imprisoning busts modelled in the most voluptuous style of woman's symmetry, those gracefully flowing petticoats, leaving so much of the well-shaped legs displayed, all assuredly set off the charms of the Genevese damsels to their utmost advantage; but, ah! were these damsels gathered in that market-place now for the mere purpose of being seen and admired? No, on this occasion they scarcely thought of themselves. They had put on their Sunday raiment because it was their habit to do so when stealing a day from

their usual avocations, and when congregating in great numbers. But all their thoughts, all their ideas, all their interest, in short, seemed absorbed in the legal tragedy that was about to take place.

There were not many troops present. The people of Geneva, having republican institutions, and governing themselves, are in the habit of preserving order without the coercion and repression of large military and constabulary forces. Still there were a few soldiers and mounted gendarmes, for the purpose of keeping the space about the scaffold clear, and maintaining a pathway amidst the dense mass for the passage of the vehicle that was expected.

The behaviour of the multitude was most decorous, forming a strange contrast with that of the crowds which assemble at the Old Bailey in London to witness the execution of a criminal. There, at Geneva, no ribald jests were heard, no practical jokes were played; there was no loud, coarse laughing, no disgraceful quarrelling, none of those indecencies and obscenities which are enacted on an execution morning around the drop in front of Newgate. True, the same morbid feeling of curiosity which serves to gather the crowd in the Old Bailey had now congregated these masses in the market-place at Geneva, but there the similitude ceased. For around the Genevese guillotine the bearing of the populace was as solemn and as respectful as if those gathered masses had come to assist at a funeral. Upon every countenance might be seen an expression of mingled awe and terror and grief, and any remarks that were made were uttered in subdued whispers, as if those who spoke felt that they were in the presence of the dead.

But let us turn our attention to the front of the prison, which establishment was situated at some little distance from the great square. At the door of that gloomy gaol stood a rude, uncouth-looking vehicle, like a common cart, drawn by two horses. Inside four coffins were placed. An escort of gendarmes was in attendance. A little after eleven the prison door was thrown open, and the three male criminals, Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden, came forth, accompanied by the Catholic priest who had all along been appointed to minister unto them. They were evidently much cast down, although to the best of their power they strove to maintain a bold front. Kobolt was the least depressed

of the three, but he was a man of more dogged resolution and decided character than his comrades. On ascending the cart they all three gave signs of a cold horror stealing upon them as they beheld their coffins, and for a moment the expression which swept over Hernani's and Walden's features was full of anguish. Kobolt hastened to seat himself on the edge of the vehicle in such a way that the priest might stand between him and the piled-up coffins.

No manifestation of feeling broke forth from the crowd assembled in front of the prison. There were neither hootings nor yellings, but, on the other hand, there were no expressions of compassion. The desperate characters of the three criminals had so fully transpired on the occasion of their trial that their fate was not likely to enlist much sympathy in their favour.

Again the prison door opens, and now all eyes are turned upon the wretched object who comes forth. It is Mrs. Ranger. Hideous as she already was when Loftus saw her a few hours back, yet more awful still was the change which had since taken place in her appearance. No conception of the most horrible witch that ever brewed her hell-broth in hollow rock or gloomy cavern could outvie the revolting aspect of the doomed woman. It was evident she was exerting all her courage for this awful occasion, evident also that she had worked herself thus up to a pitch of energy which would give way with the least untoward incident. On issuing forth from the gaol, she swept her eyes around with a quick glance of apprehension, as if fearful of receiving ill-treatment from the multitude, and then the very next moment she seemed appalled by the silence so deep, so ominous, which prevailed. Not a murmur was heard, not a syllable was breathed, even in the lowest whisper, as the turnkeys helped her up into the cart. She threw a shuddering look upon the coffins, and it was only with an almost preter-human effort that she prevented herself from giving vent to her anguish by one loud, long, and terrific shriek.

The cart moved on. The three men were, as already stated, attended by the Catholic priest, and Mrs. Ranger had the Protestant minister with her. In order that the voices of the two holy men might not jar with each other and create confusion for the ears of the doomed ones, they each spoke in low tones, perhaps all the more impressive

and solemn on that account. Mrs. Ranger listened at first with deep attention, and her lips from time to time moved as if in her heart she was echoing the clergyman's prayer. Kobolt maintained a sullen reserve, but Hernani and Walden rapidly grew more attentive to the priest as the vehicle proceeded toward its terrible destination.

The wretched woman had purposely avoided meeting the eyes of the three men who were about to suffer for having consummated a crime which her gold had bribed them to commit. They had, however, gazed with some degree of wonder upon her when she first came forth from the prison door, for they were at a loss to believe that it was possible for a human being to become so changed in a few weeks. She seemed to them at least twenty years older than at the time when the terrible deed for which they were all about to suffer was perpetrated.

The cart moved onward, attended by the escort, and surrounded by the multitude which kept pace with it. Solemn was the silence which prevailed, so far as human voices were concerned, those of the two priests being alone audible to the ears of the condemned criminals. But the sweep of the multitude, the trampling of so many feet, the heavy sounds of the cart's massive wheels, and the hoofs of the horses that drew it, as well as of the mounted escort, combined to form a din as of a flowing torrent. The procession had to pass through the street in which the Hotel Royal was situated, and though Mrs. Ranger had kept her eyes bent down from the moment she first entered the cart till now, yet she seemed to have an intuitive idea when the vehicle arrived opposite that establishment. Then she raised her looks, and swept them rapidly over the numerous windows fronting the street. They were all occupied with spectators, and therefore in so hurried a glance it would have been impossible for her to discern whether Jocelyn Loftus was of the number at any one window, but from all she knew of the young man she felt persuaded that he was not. And she was right. Not for worlds would our hero have gazed upon that spectacle of human misery.

On went the procession, and in a few minutes Mrs. Ranger knew that it was on the point of turning from the street into the great square, and that on gaining the angle of the line of buildings on the right hand her eyes would obtain a view of

something sinister, — indeed, the guillotine. Now she no longer heard what the clergyman said; his voice was as a mere droning in her ears. The blood appeared to be rushing up to her brain with a violence as if to make it burst. Sparks seemed to scintillate before her eyes, her arms and limbs tingled to the extremities of the fingers and toes, as if being singed all over. She kept her looks fixed on the angle of the street, that angle to which every instant brought her nearer and around which the first glance would show her the guillotine. It was a horrible fascination; she could not help it. Something appeared to compel her to fix her eyes on that point, while something, on the other hand, appeared to try might and main to bend her looks in another direction. But the former power was the greater; yet between the two she was tortured horribly, the conflict being, as it were, in every vein, artery, nerve, fibre, muscle, and sinew of her frame. At length the angle is reached, the cart turns somewhat, and behold! the two tall black spars of the guillotine, with the triangular ax shining ghastly in the sunlight, strike upon her view, the whole apparatus upreared above that ocean of human heads.

"My God, my God!" she murmurs, audibly, and at the same time Walden and Hernani, stricken by a mortal terror, sink down upon their knees at the feet of the Catholic priest.

Kobolt remains sitting on the edge of the vehicle, but his countenance is now hideous in its pallor, and its workings are awful to contemplate. He is now beginning to look death more closely in the face; he is walking up to it. In a few minutes more they will meet, they will touch.

But Mrs. Ranger, how feels she now? O heavens! what would she give to recall the past? What would she give to be enabled to live over again the last few months of her existence? Are her thoughts now reflected back to those times when she was the innocent child, with the cherub cheeks and the flowing hair, disporting in the garden of fruits and flowers? Does she think of the period when, as the cherished mistress of her noble seducer and in the glory of her beauty, she reclined upon the sofa, giving orders to her lackeys, and inspecting the rich merchandise which all the finest warehouses of London sent for her approval? Yes, oh, yes, she remembers all this, the bright days of her childhood, the luxuries and the splendours which were the reward

of her fall from virtue. Ah! and she remembers likewise that lone churchyard in which there is a humble grave, unadorned with marble monument and marked by no stone, but where the grass grows over the heaped-up clay, and above which in winter-time the cold winds moan and sigh and roar and rave in the alternating voices of sorrow and of fury. Yes, nor less does she review every detail and feature of her own vile career. For the faculty of thought is not laggard now. Such a vivid keenness is imparted to her mental perceptions that in a few moments her memory can run its eye over the incidents of years, and in an incredibly short space of time, the space of two or three minutes, can she embrace every incident, from the earliest scene in the cottage garden of a distant county down to this present chapter of her life which is about to close with the guillotine that stands there, in the market-place of Geneva.

Still amidst a profound silence, so far as the voices of the crowd are concerned, does the cart move on. Oh, is there nought to be done whereby she can be saved? Does man know not of any atonement which she can make? Has the law left no loophole through which she can creep? Will not justice relent at the last moment? This Protestant minister, who is a Genevese, and much respected in the city, could he do nothing for her? She is about to ask him, when a voice whispers in her soul that she has already done so a hundred times over, and that the holy man has no more power to save her than the carter who is driving her to the scaffold, or any one of the gendarmes who are guarding her progress thither. She must die, then? O heavens, she must die! What, when the sun is shining in such gorgeous splendour, and the heavens are cloudless, and all nature seems smiling and glad? Is it possible she can be doomed to die on such a day as this? No, no; it were an outrage offered to Heaven to shed human blood on such a day. They must bear her back to prison and wait till the weather changes, and becomes congenial for the taking of human life, when the sky shall be overcast with black clouds and the sun be veiled, and the buildings shall gleam not in his glorious light, and when, too, the ax of the guillotine shall seem a dull mass like lead, and not bright and shining as silver.

Such was the train of frenzied thoughts which swept through the wretched woman's mind as the cart moved

onward to the scaffold erected in the middle of the great square. Nearer and nearer it approaches; more terrible grows the apparatus of death. Oh, it is all a hideous dream, or a reality too fearful to contemplate, — so fearful, indeed, that it is only by questioning its possibility until the very last that the mind is saved from reeling beneath the shock and going mad.

The cart stops within a few feet of the steps at the back part of the scaffold. The platform is about ten feet high, lofty enough, therefore, for the entire mass of the populace around to behold the full enactment of the appalling tragedy. In the front part the two black spars tower aloft with an interval of about three feet between them. The ax is suspended close up to the cross-beam, and the string which retains it there or lets it fall at pleasure has the end fastened to a peg conveniently placed for the hand of the executioner to reach. A plank, about four feet long, and with one end fastened by a hinge to the platform, is so placed as to serve for binding the victim to it. Two pieces of wood resembling the stocks in which vagrants used to be set in England, but with only one hole, and this intended for the head of the criminal, are fitted between the lower part of the two spars. The uppermost piece of wood, being movable, works in grooves cut into the spars a short way up, but another groove runs up each spar to the very top, and in these does the ax of the guillotine work. Immediately in front of the place where the criminal's head is thrust in what may be termed the stocks an immense basket filled with sawdust is put to catch the head and the blood when the gleaming hatchet descends and does its awful work.

Such were the dread paraphernalia of death, such the arrangements of the guillotine. All these details were embraced in a single moment, ay, and comprehended, too, with a horrible clearness, by Mrs. Ranger. She shut her eyes for the first moment following the fearful survey which she thus took, but she was compelled by a dread fascination to open them again and fix them on the object of this appalling interest. As for her three companions in crime and punishment, they were now completely stricken down by the presence of death's ghastly engine, and even Kobolt began to join his accomplices in the mournful lamentations which during the last minute or two they had been putting forth.

Two men now ascended the platform of the guillotine. These were the executioner and his assistant. Stationing themselves near the plank, they waited for the gendarmes to bring them up the first individual who was to suffer. This was Mrs. Ranger. The authorities had deemed that it would be more merciful to put her out of her misery as speedily as possible, rather than suffer her to be a spectatrix of the decapitation of her companions first. Hernani wished her good-bye, and extended his hand. It was a good feeling which, at such a moment, prompted such a man thus to separate in peace from the woman who might almost be regarded as the authoress of his own calamity, inasmuch as it was she who had bribed him and his accomplices to commit the crime for which they were all about to suffer. But it was only with a mechanical movement that she took the outstretched hand, for her senses were now all paralyzed by the horror of consternation and dismay. Kobolt and Walden followed Hernani's example; their hands were also shaken for a moment, but in the same mechanical, unconscious manner, and then Mrs. Ranger was conducted by two gendarmes up the steps of the guillotine, the Protestant minister bearing her company.

Words have no power to convey the state of mind which this miserable woman experienced now, as she stood upon the threshold of another world; but we can scarcely say experienced, because she had no power of comprehending the condition of her own feelings. She seemed to be walking in a dream, yet a dream so horrible, so full of consternation, so fraught with utter dismay, that it was accompanied with the most poignant of agonies. The executioner and his assistant took her by the arms and placed her against the plank, which they had raised to a vertical position, and they proceeded to fasten her to it. Now she became convulsed with quick gaspings, and the Protestant minister, who was nigh, breathed a prayer in her ears. But it was as if he stood upon the seashore preaching to the waves when roaring in the rage of the tempest, for a similar storm was in her brain, and she heard him not. Suddenly, however, she gave a convulsive start, swept her eyes wildly around, and in that quick, lightning glance embraced the crowd, the tall spars in front of her, and all the principal features of the scene.

"Just Heaven! it is no dream, then? It is a reality!" she cried forth, in a rending tone; and then, after a single moment's pause, there thrilled from her lips a shriek as wild, as penetrating, as fully fraught with an ineffable agony as that which between thirty and forty years ago she had given when standing by the side of her mother's corpse.

But this shriek which she sent forth now on the scaffold of the guillotine in the great square of Geneva was one such as had never been heard before, a scream which those who did hear have never since forgotten, and which has often rung again and again in imagination through their brains. Oh, it was a fearful, fearful thing to be present there and hear that death-note of a human being's wild and excruciating terror going up from the platform of the ghastly engine of destruction into the air all golden with the effulgence of the glorious sun! It was a dread and a shocking thing that such a wail should pierce the noontide air on such a day, while nature was smiling and happy and joyous all around.

But what had this to do with the march of what is called human justice and the execution of man's bloodthirsty law? Having given vent to that agonizing scream, the wretched woman fell into an immediate stupor, and though she was still alive, yet all consciousness had abandoned her. Being strapped to the plank, she was lowered upon it to a horizontal position, so that her head was received in the semicircular indenture in the lower half of the stocks; the upper half was instantaneously let down, and her neck was now held shut in the hole, her head hanging out convenient for the stroke of the hatchet. And that was soon given. The executioner loosened the string from the peg, down fell the axe with a whirring noise, the blow was struck, the head was severed, and with a great gush of blood it fell into the basket beneath.

To unstrap the trunk, hurry it away to its coffin in the cart, and carry the severed head thither also, was the work of but a couple of minutes. Then one after another did the three "fishers of men" ascend the scaffold, and suffer death in the presence of the awestricken multitude.

CHAPTER XI

VALENTINE AND VENETIA

Return we once more to Carlton House.

It was about midday, and Lady Sackville had just descended from her boudoir to the drawing-room of her suite of apartments, when a domestic entered to state that Sir Valentine Malvern requested an interview with her ladyship, and that he hoped it would be accorded him. Venetia at once desired that he might be admitted, and in a few minutes the young baronet was ushered into the drawing-room.

"I gave you a special invitation to call upon me," said Venetia, extending her hand with graceful affability toward him, "and yet you send in a message as if you thought that there was some difficulty in obtaining access to me."

"It is but midday," answered Sir Valentine, "full two hours earlier than the proper time for paying visits of ceremony or courtesy, but, as it appeared to me, the most suitable hour for making a call on a matter of business."

"A matter of business?" echoed Venetia, with a sweet smile, "I am at a loss to conceive how there can be any business between us. But in any case you are welcome. As for the propriety of the hour, you are quite right, Sir Valentine. This is just that disagreeable part of the day when there is little or nothing to do, and it is difficult to know how to amuse oneself."

"A little embroidery, or tambour-work, or drawing?" suggested Sir Valentine; but he spoke in a somewhat melancholy manner, and also with a partial embarrassment amounting to constraint.

"I dislike such occupations," answered Venetia. "I was always of indolent habits. I used once to be much addicted to novel-reading, but latterly I have given it up.

I find that there are so very, very few books in which the world is depicted truly. It was all very well when I was accustomed to judge the world entirely by the books I read; then they had an extraordinary charm for me."

"And yet your ladyship has read other books besides novels?" said Valentine, gazing upon her with a sort of mournful interest.

"Yes, assuredly," she replied, again smiling with all her wonted sweetness. "Does not the world call me accomplished? Well, and without vanity I may say that so I am, considering how little it requires to render a lady accomplished in high life. For instance, I have read all our best poets, and possessing a memory of very great power, — this too I may say without vanity, because memory is a gift, — I can repeat the finest and most striking passages of these works. Then I can draw when I choose. Here," she continued, rising from the sofa on which she was seated, and approaching a table where she opened a splendid portfolio, "these are my specimens. See, here are drawings in chalk, and drawings in pencil, and here are designs in water-colours. Most of these I did when at Acacia Cottage, before I came to Carlton House, but since I have been here I have had no time for drawing, or, rather, perhaps no inclination."

"They are very beautiful," said Valentine, who had followed Lady Sackville to the table. "I should not think of flattering you for a moment," he continued, "but I myself am very fond of drawing, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing these specimens to exhibit a great proficiency. And yet they bear every indication of a taste rapidly cultivated and not gradually developed, a taste, so to speak, which put forth all its powers of a sudden, and grappled with difficult subjects before it passed entirely through the usual length of training."

"You are right, Sir Valentine," answered Venetia. "and now I see that you are really no flatterer, but at the same time an excellent judge. Well, then, for my other accomplishments, I am considered a tolerably good musician, quite good enough to compete with any lady who sits down to her piano or her harp either for her own recreation or that of her friends, at a select party. Then, as for my conversation, when you and I come to know more of each other you will be able to judge me on that score."

"And do you think," asked Sir Valentine, surveying her with a singular expression, "that we shall know more of each other? Do you wish it?"

"Did I not give you a pressing invitation to call?" asked Venetia. Then resuming her seat on the sofa, while the young baronet returned to the chair which he had taken near her, she said, in a somewhat more serious tone, "But tell me, Sir Valentine, what you meant ere now by saying that your visit was of a business character? Perhaps the answer will explain wherefore I behold a certain constraint in your manner."

"Do you consider my manner to be unfriendly?" he asked, with some degree of hesitation.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Venetia, "I was rejoiced to find that almost from the first moment you entered the room we began conversing in the most friendly manner together, so that I was actually induced to enter upon an account of all my accomplishments. But I hope you will believe me, Sir Valentine, when I assure you on my honour as a lady," added Venetia, seriously, "that it was in the same unaffected, artless manner as of a sister talking to a brother."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Valentine Malvern, and again did so singular an expression of mingled embarrassment and yet kind interest pass over his countenance that Venetia saw there was something more in his mind than she could comprehend.

"I see," she said, "that you wish to speak to me upon some subject that you nevertheless hesitate to approach." Then, in a still lower tone, she added, "Perhaps it is relative to the first time we ever met? You seek an explanation —"

"Do not for a moment fancy that I come hither swayed by an impertinent curiosity," interrupted Valentine.

"You have never mentioned —" began Venetia.

"Never," rejoined Malvern, instantaneously comprehending what she meant. "I was in St. George's Church when you were married to Lord Sackville, then Mr. Sackville —"

"What, you were there?" exclaimed Venetia, in astonishment.

"Yes; it was, however, with no specific intention, it was purely accidental. But when I saw you I was struck with

amazement. For some weeks or months previously I had heard of Miss Trelawney, — every one had heard of Miss Trelawney, — and I was astonished on being told in that church and on that occasion that you were Miss Trelawney. Then said I to myself, ' I am mistaken; ' and yet I could not altogether convince myself that I was so. I do not wish to flatter you, very far from that, but I was at a loss to believe at the time that there could be another young lady in the world resembling the Miss Venetia Trelawney whom I saw walk up the aisle of St. George's Church and proceed to the altar on that occasion."

" Well, and you were never led to make inquiries? " asked Lady Sackville.

" No, never," responded Malvern. " I have already told you that I have no impertinent curiosity; and besides, though temporarily interested in you, and the apparent mystery attending you at that time, I was too much engrossed with my poor father's disappearance to give the circumstance a prominent place in my memory. But the other night, when you interrupted my interview with the prince, from the very signs you made me did I perceive that the suspicion which I had entertained at St. George's Church was, after all, the correct one, and that the young lady passing by the name of Venetia Trelawney was really the same whom I had once before met under such very different circumstances."

" And now you seek explanations? " said Venetia, quickly.

" No, very far from it," responded Malvern. " I have already assured you that I have no impertinent curiosity. Besides which, under ordinary circumstances your affairs would not regard me, and I trust that I know the position and the duties of a gentleman too well to pry into the secrets of any lady."

" Under ordinary circumstances, you say? " ejaculated Venetia. " Are there, then, some extraordinary circumstances," she inquired, " relative to you and me? "

" Do you not think," asked Malvern, " that I am talking to you in a somewhat familiar strain, despite a certain embarrassment and awkwardness which I just now felt, but which is rapidly wearing off the nearer I approach the final revelation? But I ask, do you not think that I am conversing in a sort of familiar, free, and offhand manner,

as if there had subsisted between us the intimacy of several years, or as if we were cousins, or anything else of the kind you like? And yet this is but the third time I have ever spoken to you in my life: once in Hanover Square, — you know when, — the other night in the presence of the prince, and now."

"But I am not at all offended at your manner," said Venetia. "Perhaps I rather encouraged it by my own when you first entered the room."

"You know that I am engaged to be married to Florence Eaton?" said Malvern.

"I have heard so," replied Lady Sackville. "But why do you thus start from one topic to another?"

"Listen," continued Malvern, "hear what I have to say. You have heard that I am going to marry Florence. Have you likewise been told that I love her very, very dearly, and that not for worlds would I wrong her or prove unfaithful to her in word or deed?"

"I honour you for these assurances," replied Venetia. "Rumour declares the Honourable Miss Eaton to be a most beautiful as well as amiable and excellent young lady, and I sincerely hope your marriage will be a happy one. But why have you turned the conversation upon this point?"

"Loving Florence as I do," returned Malvern, "and incapable of being faithless to her either in thought or deed, you might think it strange that I am sitting here addressing you in this familiar kind of style."

"And yet there is a sort of melancholy in your manner," returned Venetia. "I know full well, yes, indeed, I am convinced, that all you have been saying has a grave meaning, and is the prelude to something yet unsaid. I have already told you that I am very far from being offended with this frankness of tone in which you address me, and solemnly do I assure you that, though I know so little of you in reality, I feel as if we were long-standing acquaintances and old friends. It is this that makes me experience an interest in you, and wish you so much happiness with your betrothed. Did I not ere now say that I spoke to you of my accomplishments just as if it were friend speaking to friend?"

"No, you said sister talking to brother," interrupted Malvern. "You see that I am getting more and more

familiar. I scarcely think that I have once called you ' my lady ' or ' your ladyship ' during the present interview, and if I continue talking much longer, it is as likely as not I shall address you by your Christian name next."

" I must confess myself totally at a loss to understand the meaning which lies hid behind your words," and as Venetia spoke she fixed her eyes earnestly upon Malvern. " You are indeed incomprehensible. There is in your manner all the mournfulness arising from the recent funeral which has taken place — "

" Ah! then you heard that my father's remains had been found, and that they were interred the day before yesterday? "

" Yes, I saw a paragraph in the paper to that effect; and it is because I know how deep must be the shade of melancholy which the sad ceremony has left upon your mind," added Venetia, " that I am all the more at a loss to comprehend your present conduct. For that you are incapable of jesting or of jocularity under such circumstances — "

" Heaven forbid! " exclaimed Malvern, emphatically.

" Well, then, there is some strange meaning hidden beneath your words, and likewise concealed by your manner," continued Venetia. " Again I say that it seems to me as if you were preparing me for some revelation."

" Yes, I am. Are you prepared? " inquired Malvern, and he took her hand.

" Prepared for what? " asked Venetia. " You alarm me."

" It is as a brother speaking to a sister that I am now addressing you," resumed Malvern, " and methought it my duty to give you some little preparation. In a word, suppose that you and I were closely related? "

" But how is this possible? " exclaimed Venetia. " And yet I see by your manner that it is so. Moreover, you would not jest, you are incapable of jesting under such circumstances."

" I am serious, solemnly serious," replied Malvern. " We are related. In short, we owe our being to the same father, and you are my half-sister."

Lady Sackville was amazed at this announcement, which to her was incomprehensible. But Sir Valentine proceeded

to give her certain explanations which opened her eyes to the comprehension of many mysteries, and which fully confirmed the statement he had made. This is not, however, the place to lay these explanations before the reader. They will be given in due course, and in the interval a requisite amount of patience must be exercised.

"But tell me, Valentine, tell me candidly," said Lady Sackville, when their long conference was nearly brought to a termination, "do you not regret having found so near a relative in me? Oh, I feel that I am blushing as I look you in the face, for rumour with her thousand tongues cannot fail to have wafted to your ears the allegation that I am the mistress of the prince."

"I did not come hither to judge you," returned Valentine, "but to communicate an important secret. That communication has been made, and now it is for you to decide whether you wish to consider me as your brother, and whether I am to look upon you as a sister."

"Can you doubt that such is my wish?" asked Venetia, in a tone of gentle reproach.

"But remember," rejoined Malvern, "that, legally speaking, we are not related."

"No, for the stigma of illegitimacy rests upon me and my sister," replied Lady Sackville.

"Nevertheless," immediately observed Malvern, "so far as I am concerned, I cannot lose sight of the one solemn fact that the same father was the author of our being. Moreover, inasmuch as the late Sir Archibald Malvern deceived your mother, — alas, that I should have thus to speak of a father! — and sent her broken-hearted to an early grave, there is no possible atonement which I, as his eldest son and living representative, am not prepared to make on his behalf to you and to your sister, the neglected, unacknowledged children of that betrayed and broken-hearted mother. Therefore is it that I offer you and your sister a brother's love, a brother's fondness, and if you need it and will accept it, a brother's counsel likewise. I would even add, taking a more worldly view of the subject, that of the large fortune which I have inherited equal shares shall be placed at your disposal."

"So much goodness, so much generosity, overpowers me," murmured Venetia, melting into tears. Then suddenly wring-

ing her hands as a troop of bitter memories swept through her brain, she cried, " Oh, wherefore did I not know all this a year ago? It would have saved me from having become what I am."

" Then you are not happy, my dear sister? " asked Malvern, in a tone of the deepest interest.

" Valentine," returned Lady Sackville, " I should have been happier, far happier, had I remained virtuous. But it is now for me to give you certain explanations, and you will perceive that I am as much to be pitied as to be blamed. You know wherefore I came to London, and how bitterly, how cruelly, I was disappointed? This disappointment was the main cause that helped to place me in circumstances to the tide of which I was compelled to yield. I was hurried away by them — But listen, and I will give you the whole history in a continuous manner."

With these words Lady Sackville entered upon her explanations to the young baronet, and he listened with the deepest interest. She told him everything that had occurred to her during the first few months of her sojourn in London, — how she came to occupy Acacia Cottage, how she was led to marry Horace Sackville, and how they were elevated to the peerage and installed at Carlton House. She likewise told him various particulars relative to her sister, — that sister of whom they had ere now been speaking, and whom she represented as being engaged to marry a young nobleman of the highest character and the most exalted principles. But she did not explain to her half-brother how she had voluntarily abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, how she had been tricked into an amour with the Earl of Curzon, how she had been coerced by Colonel Malpas, and how circumstances had induced her to sell her charms to the Marquis of Leveson. No, all these profligacies and depravities she carefully concealed. She would sooner have perished than confess them; and as Valentine entertained not the faintest suspicion in those respects, there was no necessity to make such confessions. Therefore, with regard to the dark side of her character, he saw her only as the mistress of the prince, and he pitied her, he compassionated her, for by the tale which she had told him and which was perfectly true so far as it went, he saw that she had indeed been hurried on by the current of a destiny which few

women of even far stronger mind would have been able to resist, even supposing that a large amount of virtuous principle served as an auxiliary.

"And now do you not loathe and despise me?" asked Venetia, when she had concluded the explanations which she thought fit to give.

"No; as a brother I sympathize with you, I pity you," answered Valentine. "Were I your parent and had a right to speak with authority, I should say that I forgave you."

"Oh, you are all kindness," exclaimed Venetia, and she embraced him affectionately. "For Heaven's sake do not think that I am altogether depraved. No, nor is my husband. There have been moments when he and I have compared notes of our feelings, and have allowed all the sentiments and emotions of our better natures to assert their empire. He is not happy, nor am I. A year's experience of a court life has not wedded us to it."

"And you would leave it, you would abandon it?" exclaimed Malvern, joyfully. "At all events, my dear sister, you will withdraw yourself from this position of moral degradation? It is not too late for your husband and yourself to ensure your mutual happiness — But I see that this is not the moment to converse upon so serious a topic. Your mind is now under the influence of unusual feelings, excited by the revelation I have made to you, and you and I must have opportunities of serious and earnest discourse together. But your sister, our sister — "

"Ah, my sister!" echoed Venetia, and again she grew troubled.

"I would propose," continued Valentine, "that you and I should go together, as soon as convenient to yourself, and communicate the secret of her birth to our sister. Besides, I long to embrace her. You have drawn so delightful a portrait of her character that I am impatient to become acquainted with her. When, then, shall we go?"

"To-morrow," replied Venetia. "In the morning I will set off in my travelling-carriage, accompanied only by my maid, Jessica, who is my confidante, and knows pretty well all the circumstances of my life. Where will you join us?"

"At Blackheath," returned Malvern. "You will stop to change horses at the Green Man tavern, and I will be there in readiness to accompany you."

"Agreed," observed Venetia. "I shall start at nine o'clock to-morrow. At ten we shall meet at Blackheath."

They then separated, and when Sir Valentine was gone, Venetia fell into a profound reverie, during which she thought over all that had just taken place, and then she reflected upon the course which she should pursue for the future. But while she was still deliberating upon all the features of her position, — whether she could possibly extricate herself from its trammels, and if so, whether she should, — the door opened, and a domestic announced Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

CHAPTER XII

NATURE'S BETTER FEELINGS

The baronet, as the reader is well aware, was a particular favourite with Venetia. She certainly liked him, and she was just in that mood on the present occasion when his company would prove agreeable. She had too many unpleasant things on her mind to bear thinking of long, and she was therefore well pleased at a visit thus calculated to distract her thoughts from gloomy ponderings.

"My dear Venetia," began Sir Douglas, sweeping his eyes around to assure himself that they were alone, otherwise he would not have addressed her in such a familiar manner, "it is a perfect age since I saw you last. Several long weeks, I declare. But you are as radiant and as beautiful as ever — no, not quite so radiant, for methinks that the smile now upon your features looks as if it were chasing away a recent gloom," and he embraced her as he spoke.

"Now, that is only a kiss of friendship, mind," she exclaimed, archly.

"And why not of love?" he inquired, placing himself by her side upon the sofa.

"Because I have been very seriously thinking that I shall turn over a new leaf," answered Lady Sackville.

"And that meditation has made you serious? But a new leaf in what?"

"In my conduct. You really must acknowledge, my dear Douglas, that I have been a very naughty, wicked creature."

"What, for allowing me at one time to bask in the sunlight of your smiles?" exclaimed Huntingdon. "As for your intimacy with the prince, the world does not make it a reproach to you, and where the world sees no harm, what is the use of your repining?"

"Do you not think that there can be more true happiness in a life of virtuous enjoyment and quiet contentment?" asked Venetia, half-serious, half-smiling.

"If you were less beautiful than you are," returned the baronet, "one would be apt to think you had experienced some slight or neglect that made you look with a jaundiced eye upon the pleasures, the dissipations, and the gaieties of a court life."

"And may not those pleasures themselves become insipid?" asked Venetia.

"Truly so," was Huntingdon's response. Then, after a little hesitation, he said, "I have a very great mind to make you a confession, Venetia."

"Do. I am so fond of being made a confidante."

"But I am afraid you will laugh at me."

"No," rejoined the lady, "for I can already anticipate what you desire to tell me."

"Do guess, then," exclaimed the baronet. "It will save me, perhaps, some embarrassment, if you will interpret my feelings for me."

"Well, then, I will try," said Venetia. "You are in love."

"Yes, with you. That you have known all along."

"No, I do not mean that," continued Lady Sackville. "You are no more in love with me than I am with you. We like each other, we experienced a transitory passion for each other," she added, with a slight blush, "but that is all. What I mean is, you are in love with that Ariadne Varian of whom you have before spoken to me."

"And suppose that I told you that I was," observed Sir Douglas, "and that I had come frankly and candidly to consult you as a friend?"

"I should say that I felt gratified and pleased with your confidence," answered Venetia, "and that, experiencing a real interest in your welfare, I should give you the best possible advice."

"Well, I think that I must unbosom myself altogether to you," resumed Sir Douglas. "Besides, you once before, when speaking of Ariadne, counselled me to follow the bent of my own inclinations. The truth is, Venetia, I am tired of the life I have been leading, and, like you, I am anxious to turn over a new leaf. As a matter of course, you are well

aware that my habits have been somewhat of the most dissipated cast, and that I have indulged a little too freely in the juice of the grape. I know that I have partially injured my constitution, but, thank God, as yet I have neither got a red nose nor bleared eyes; still, I look pale — "

"You look better than I have seen you for a long time past," interrupted Venetia. "So far from being pale, there is a little colour upon your cheeks, an appearance of health which I never beheld there before."

"Ah! I am delighted to hear you say this," exclaimed the baronet. "The truth is, I was fishing for your opinion on the point, and you have given it to me. Well, I do feel much better in health and also in spirits than I have done for some time. But I will tell you how it happened. A little time ago I began to feel so queer that I got alarmed. I always awoke in the morning with a nausea at the stomach, and my hand trembled so that I could not shave myself. Pardon such details; they are not perhaps overdelicate, but you and I are friends. So I may add that I was compelled to take a glass of brandy to put my stomach in order, and then a glass of curaçoa to steady my hand, and then a tumbler of hock and soda-water to quench the heat which the alcohol had excited. Unless I did all this, I could not begin the day, and, as it was, I seldom ate any breakfast. Altogether, I was getting regularly out of sorts, and began to entertain serious alarms lest death was coming upon me apace."

"Do not talk in so shocking a manner," interrupted Venetia. "Death! I have never thought of it yet," she added, with a slightly perceptible shudder.

"Well, it is not a subject for a splendid drawing-room, with the sun shining in gloriously at the open casement, and with the zephyr wafting around us the perfume of all the delicious flowers on the terrace outside. But shall I go on with my own story? "

"Yes, assuredly. Do not make it too gloomy," said Venetia, now smiling again.

"I will not. To be brief," continued Sir Douglas, "I resolved upon consulting my worthy and excellent friend, Doctor Corpperas, and to him I went. He listened to me with true professional knowingness. When I had explained all I felt, he shook his head gravely. 'We live too fast, my dear Sir Douglas,' he said. 'We pay too much homage to

Bacchus, and not enough to Æsculapius. We have no business to take brandy, curaçoa, and hock with soda-water of a morning; much less ought we to go to bed in a state of obfuscation four nights out of the seven. We are knocking nails in our coffin; we are killing ourselves rapidly. We must turn over a new leaf.' All this was very sage and very sapient, no doubt, and I could not help agreeing with the great physician. In fact, I had come to the very same conclusions myself before I visited him. He went on with a long tirade, which I do not, however, mean to inflict upon you, my dear Venetia, but all that he said amounted to this: that I had certainly done myself a great deal of harm by dissipation, but that I possessed a constitution naturally strong, and that the evil was not beyond reparation; that I ought to go to the seaside and bathe, give up drinking almost entirely, live upon mutton, roast or boiled, and go to bed early; and that if I would do all this, I should soon see the beneficial results. He however added that he thought it just as well I should have another opinion on the subject, as he did not like me to act solely on his responsibility. I accordingly asked whom he would recommend me to consult, whereupon he declared that it did not much matter; any eminent physician would do, but if there were one who, amongst all, had devoted himself to the effects of hard living upon the human constitution, that man was the far-famed and the very celebrated Doctor Thurston."

"And what did you do then?" asked Venetia.

"Oh, of course I went to Doctor Thurston," continued the baronet, in his half-serious, half-jocular manner. "The same scene was enacted all over again, with very trifling alterations. For Doctor Thurston declared that it was by no means necessary to have come to him since I had received the advice of such an able, eminent, and highly talented physician as Doctor Copperas, but that since his (Doctor Thurston's) opinion was asked, he could only say he fully coincided with every tittle of the suggestions offered by Doctor Copperas, with the trifling difference, perhaps, that in addition to mutton boiled and roasted, I might sometimes take it broiled in the shape of chops. Accordingly, I went away highly gratified that these two learned men so nearly coincided with each other, and of course I thought it a libel upon the profession to talk about doctors differing."

"And you followed the advice?" said Venetia.

"Pretty closely," returned the baronet. "I went down to the seaside, made a vow to leave off drinking a single thing in the shape of alcohol till dinner-time, and then only six glasses of wine. I missed my usual quantum terribly at first, but soon grew accustomed to the regimen. I took sea-baths and plenty of exercise, and went to bed at ten o'clock regularly. But as for the mutton, roast, broiled, and boiled, I must confess that I varied those dainties with a piece of beef, a chicken, and a little fish, for if there be one thing that I hate more than another it is sheep in any shape, roast, boiled, or broiled. However, I feel my health and my spirits so wonderfully improved that nothing could induce me to exceed my six glasses of wine after dinner; and as for tempting me to drink anything before dinner, why, I can assure you, my dear Venetia, that if there were wine now moistening your dewy lips, I would not kiss them. But as there is not, I will," and he suited the action to the word.

"You are faithless to Ariadne Varian," said Venetia, laughing. "Besides, I can assure you, on my honour, that I am seriously determined to reform myself, and all that you have just told me proves how easily it can be done if a proper effort be only made. To speak without a jest, I tell you candidly, my dear Douglas, that, entertaining a very sincere friendship for you, I am delighted at everything you have told me. And now I wish to hear the conclusion of your confessions."

"What more have I to confess?" asked the baronet, smiling.

"Why, your feelings relative to Ariadne. Oh, I can read the human heart more easily, perhaps, than you think. Shall I tell you something about yourself?"

"Yes, pray do," exclaimed the baronet. "Proceed. I enjoy the liveliness of this conversation amazingly."

"Then, listen," resumed Venetia. "At the time all those strange things happened some months ago relative to Ariadne Varian, she made a deep impression upon your heart, but you did not choose at once to acknowledge that you had fallen headlong in love with the sister of a common clerk. When you had provided for her and her brother with the most noble generosity, you rarely went near the home you had given them. You tried to wean yourself from

contemplating her image, you thought it was a fantasy that would pass; perhaps you even plunged more deeply into the vortex of dissipation, to escape from it. But all would not do. You at length perceived that the sentiment with which she had inspired you was stronger and more durable than you fancied. While at the seaside you have had greater leisure for reflection, and this reflection has been pursued with a brain less clouded than heretofore. You have been dwelling upon the innocence, beauty, and amiability of Ariadne; you have perhaps even reproached yourself for neglecting her, because you have seen how worthy she was of your attention. At last you have come to the conclusion that she is necessary to your happiness, and now the only struggle which remains is to conquer the false pride that still lurks in a dark corner of your soul. But, on the other hand, you do feel all the pride of a man who, having reformed his own conduct, has rendered himself worthy of approaching an innocent and stainless damsel with the overtures of affection. Ah! believe me, my dear friend, this latter is a very honourable pride and does you infinite credit. Shall it not subdue, then, that other sentiment of pride, so false and hollow, which makes you hesitate to hasten and offer your hand to Ariadne? "

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed in mingled astonishment and delight upon Venetia as she thus spoke. Never had she appeared so enchantingly beautiful in his eyes, for she was radiant with the satisfaction of knowing that she was giving the most friendly counsel and pleading on behalf of an excellent girl. But it was no longer with a sensuous feeling that the baronet now surveyed her; it was with a purer and holier emotion than he perhaps had ever before experienced or she had ever before inspired.

" Venetia, there is something noble in your character, after all," he exclaimed, unable to repress this utterance of his thoughts. " You are not the mere woman of the world, the mere court beauty, but you possess a heart. I declare solemnly that there are in you the elements of great goodness, but you have been spoiled by the artificialities, the temptations, and the vain scenes in the midst of which you have been flung. I do really and truly love you now, but not as I have before told you that I loved you. No, now I admire and esteem you," and taking her hand, he did not touch it

with his lips, but he pressed it in the fervid warmth of friendship.

"Have I interpreted all your feelings aright?" she asked, much moved by the present scene.

"Yes, in every detail," he responded. "I could not have fathomed my own heart so nicely, so delicately, and so accurately as you have probed it for me. But is it not strange that you and I should be conversing in such a manner? Who would believe that the gay and brilliant Lady Sackville and the dissipated Douglas Huntingdon could thus have settled their attention upon serious matters, ay, and with the most genuine sincerity into the bargain? But it is so."

"Assuredly, on my part," said Venetia. "But are you quite confident that, now you are returned to London, you will not yield to its temptations and relapse into the vortex of pleasure?"

"No, it is impossible," exclaimed the baronet. "I can assure you that although ere now I may have spoken jocularly and good-humouredly of my alarms relative to my own case and of my visits to the physicians, yet that I was too much frightened at the time ever to run such foolish risks again. A man must be mad to trifle with his own health, for, after all, health is the greatest of blessings. I should loathe myself if I had not sufficient command over my inclinations, after the experiences I have gleaned, to be able to conquer any desire for a recurrence to the delights of dissipation. Venetia, I can assure you, in all solemn seriousness," he added, fixing his eyes with steady earnestness and frank sincerity upon her, "that I am an altered man. I regarded you as a friend, I liked you, and I could not help coming to tell you all this. Only, in the first instance, I did not exactly know how to make the confession, and I was somewhat afraid of ridicule. But you have generously, and I may almost say unexpectedly, come to my help; you have given an interpretation to my feelings in the most liberal and enlightened sense, and I sincerely thank you. Shall we not always continue the very best of friends?"

"We will," answered Venetia, with evident sincerity. "And now tell me what is to be Ariadne's fate?"

"Immediately upon quitting you, I shall proceed to her abode," replied the baronet, "and shall offer her my hand."

"You are resolved to do this?"

"I am fully resolved. Even if my own heart had not suggested the determination, your pleadings relative to that amiable girl would have been sufficient."

"Now go, then," said Venetia. "You are bent upon so excellent an errand that it is a sin to detain you here. Besides, without knowing Ariadne, I nevertheless entertain the belief, considering all that has taken place between you, that she must love you. A young girl, whose heart was previously disengaged, could not become with impunity the heroine of so many wildly romantic adventures as those in which she figured with you as the hero. For you remember that you told me everything relative to the incidents at the hut near Shooter's Hill, and also your rescuing her from your burning house — But go; I will not detain you."

"Farewell for the present," said the baronet, taking Venetia's hand, which he once more pressed cordially.

"Farewell, and may all happiness attend you," she answered; and they separated, with merely this clasping of the hand, and with no more embracings.

The scene had a most beneficial influence upon Venetia's mind. Following so closely upon her interview with Sir Valentine Malvern, it was chastening and salutary. It touched many of those better feelings of her nature which had long slumbered in the depths of her soul, but were not altogether destroyed. She felt, too, that she had behaved well in the counsel which she had given Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and she was satisfied with herself.

Wishing to commune with her thoughts in perfect freedom from the chances of interruption, she descended from the drawing-room and passed into the garden belonging to the palace. She entered upon the terrace to which Sir Douglas had alluded during his visit, and leaning over the slight iron railing which fenced it, she looked down upon a charming parterre of flowers beneath. With her eyes fixed upon them, she grew pensive, and yet no shade of mournfulness was upon her features. She thought how pleasant a thing it was to be beautiful and to afford pleasure by the existence of such beauty; and she went on to reflect how loathsome would be those flowers if their lovely petals were to distil poison instead of honey. Then she said to herself, "And I, too, am beautiful. But, oh, how happy should I be if my

loveliness had never proved the source of poison to my thoughts. Is it too late to reform? Is it not possible for me yet to enjoy real happiness in this world? "

And then she meditated long and earnestly upon a subject so fraught with vital importance to herself. But a cold shudder crept over her when she remembered through what deep mire of pollutions she had been dragged, how she had passed through the arms of five persons in addition to her husband; and now, indeed, did a dark shade of sadness fall upon her lovely countenance, while the crystal tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly she felt a hand laid upon her shoulder, but so profoundly had she been absorbed in her reflections that she had heard the sound of no footstep advancing. Starting quickly, she turned and beheld her husband.

" What, in tears, Venetia? " he exclaimed, " and in the midst of a scene so bright and beautiful as this, and with the golden sunbeams playing around you! "

" Horace," she answered, " a singular change has come over me. But I can tell you nothing now. You must not question me. To-morrow I am going out of town to pass a day or two with my sister. On my return I will tell you everything, and perhaps — perhaps," she added, falteringly, " you and I may have some very serious discourse together."

With these words she hurried away, leaving her husband transfixed to the spot and gazing after her in silent wonderment.

CHAPTER XIII

SCENES IN THE DANE JOHN

The reader's attention must now be again directed to Canterbury. It was on the same day and at the same hour — that is to say, at noon — when the preceding incidents took place that the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, minor canon of the cathedral, was walking to and fro in the beautiful shady avenue of trees in the Dane John. He was in a deep reverie, but his thoughts were bent upon no topic fitting for a minister of the gospel. On the contrary, he was brooding over a passion that was devouring him. Against this passion had he struggled with great efforts, but it was stronger than himself. He had allowed his imagination to dwell upon it until it had become his master. The object of his passion was Louisa Stanley.

About ten months had elapsed since he had committed that outrage which has already been so fully described. The reader will remember how Bernard Audley had Louisa carried off by hireling wretches, — gipsies, indeed, whose services he had engaged for the purpose, how she had contrived to escape from his house, how he had overtaken her in the crypt of the cathedral, and how, at the moment when she was about to succumb to his power, a tall female form dressed in black had sprung forward and rescued her from his clutches. It will likewise be remembered how she was conveyed home in a carriage by Bernard Audley and this female, and how she was induced to pass the matter over in silence in consequence of the letter, full of entreaty, which that same female had written to her. Nevertheless she had, as in duty bound, explained the circumstance to Jocelyn Loftus, who had called upon the minor canon on the following morning, and warned the unprincipled clergyman against

a renewal of his persecution in respect to an amiable, innocent, and excellent young lady. From that time the Reverend Audley Bernard had left Louisa altogether unmolested; indeed, he himself had been for some while absent from Canterbury, doubtless pursuing his profligacies in secret elsewhere. But whithersoever he went, and no matter into what scenes he plunged, still was he followed by the image of the beautiful Louisa. He was continually picturing her to himself, and thus did the fury of his passion grow upon him.

It was indeed a fury. Nothing of love's softness was there in his heart, but the craving of fierce desire; no tender, beaming light shining as a heavenly halo, but the lurid glow and devouring candescence of a volcano. Thus, when he dwelt upon her image, it was not to admire and to worship, but to gloat upon it with lustful ardour. And now, within the last few weeks, he had returned to Canterbury, and on two or three occasions had he seen Louisa in company with Mary Owen, when the two young ladies walked out together. Mary herself was sweetly pretty, as we have already described, but the minor canon scarcely noticed her at all, so entirely was her beauty outshone by the transcending loveliness of Louisa. The reader cannot have forgotten how matchless indeed were the graces and how inimitable the charms which combined to render Louisa Stanley the most heavenly of earthly beings. Not tall, but so exquisitely shaped, with a sylphid slenderness of figure, and a statuesque modelling of the bust, which was properly full without being voluptuously exuberant, she seemed taller than she really was; and while her step had all the elastic lightness of youth, her bearing was replete with maidenly elegance. The spirit of innocence and truthfulness seemed, as it were, to shine through her. Her dark brown hair, so rich and luxuriant, appeared the velvet drapery that flowed about the alabaster throne of her forehead, where candour and chastity made their chosen seat. Artlessness and innocence were in the expression of her bright coral lips, and in the deep blue eyes, fringed with their long dark lashes. Altogether, she was a being to be loved with the purest and holiest affection, and assuredly it was no fault of hers if in the bad heart of the minor canon her image had inspired so impure a flame.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. It was midday,

and Bernard Audley was walking to and fro in the Dane John. His thoughts were fixed absorbedly upon the image of Louisa Stanley. He had seen her an hour previously entering a shop in Canterbury, and accompanied by the young lady whom on former occasions he had observed in her society, and whom indeed he had accidentally learned to be a Miss Owen. This young lady was now in deep mourning, and her countenance wore a look of the profoundest melancholy. But few and transient were the thoughts which the minor canon bestowed upon her; whereas, on the other hand, deeper and more gloating than ever was the concentration of all his interest on the image of Louisa Stanley.

He had not ventured to accost her, he had even kept at a distance; but the brief view which he had obtained of her graceful form, with the elegant feet and ankles tripping glancingly over the threshold of the shop which he saw her enter, had at once fired his imagination to a maddening degree. He had watched till she and her companion came forth again. At a distance, and unperceived by them, had he followed as they retraced their way back to the cottage, which they never left for more than an hour or two at a time, and having kept them in sight until they had traversed the Dane John in their walk homeward, he had remained there, not daring to follow them any farther. But why dare he not? It was because the unhappy man felt himself irresistibly impelled to draw nearer and nearer to the two young ladies, and he knew that if he continued to yield to this impulse he should be urged to overtake them altogether and address himself to Louisa, despite the many reasons which warned him against such a course. For the moment, then, he had thus far resisted the temptation, thus far wrestled against the power that was impelling him on. But the effort was fearful, and the fury of the inward fire was fanned rather than mitigated.

"That girl unconsciously and innocently exercises an empire over me which will yet drive me to folly and to crime!" It was thus he mused within himself, and his countenance was marked with the strong lines of a raging passion, so that, handsome though it were, it looked dark, sinister, and repulsive to a degree at this moment. "Oh, to possess her, oh, for one hour of her love, and I would give ten years of my life. I cannot live thus. It seems written in the

book of destiny that I am to ruin myself, body and soul, here and hereafter, for that girl. Well, and she is worth a crime. Ah! no, not to dare death, not to dare the scaffold, for a few brief minutes of frenzied enjoyment. But if it were possible to clasp her, naked and glowing, in these arms, and to know that for hours, throughout a whole night, it were mine to revel in her beauties, that were a paradise worth any risk. Fool that I am thus to allow my passions to obtain such mastery over me. What, shall I peril everything, station, fortune, even my very life, for this girl? No, no; it were a madness, utter, utter folly."

And, as if to escape from his thoughts, he quickened his pace and hurried along the avenue; but still the image of Louisa was uppermost in his mind, and his heated imagination pictured to itself all that she must be when denuded of her vesture. Thus did he in fancy gloat over her charms, and plunging deeper and deeper down into the fevered dream, he felt as if he were revelling in those beauties which he thus delineated to his conception.

"Oh, I shall go mad, I shall go mad!" he exclaimed aloud, suddenly stopping short. "Yes, unless, indeed, I can either tear the image of Louisa Stanley forth from my soul or else procure the gratification of my desires."

At this moment he was startled by a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens close by, but looking hastily around, he saw no one. Indeed, at that particular time there did not appear to be any person in the avenue save himself.

"It was nothing," he said, still speaking aloud, but being unconscious as it were, that he thus gave audible vent to his musings. Then, as he slowly walked onward, he exclaimed in the excitement of a desperate resolve, "By Heaven! I will possess her, happen what may."

With these words he suddenly turned back, and retracing his way along the avenue, proceeded at a quick rate in the direction of the cottage where Louisa Stanley dwelt with her bedridden aunt and Mary Owen. Not that he had any settled purpose in view, but he was impelled by the mastery of his passions to hasten toward the cottage, and watch from some convenient hiding-place to see whether Louisa Stanley should issue forth again this day, in which case he had made up his mind to address her. But what did he propose to say? What did he purpose to do? Was the bold, bad man so

maddened, so blinded, or so besotted with the fury of his unfortunate passion as to believe that either by entreaty or by threat he could impart any of its fire to the chaste and stainless bosom of the charming Louisa? No, he did not think this; and again we say, that he had no settled purpose in view, but he was impelled toward Louisa's abode by that strong tide of passion to which he had now abandoned himself, and which was almost as strong as destiny itself.

Scarcely had he quitted the Dane John when from behind that thick group of evergreens where he had heard the rustling, and which were impenetrable to the eye, a tall female in black came forth. Her countenance was pale even to ghastliness, the traces of deep sorrows were upon her features, and yet the great beauty which had once marked that countenance was not altogether extinguished. The dark eyes still flashed with strange fires, and the pale quivering lips revealed teeth which were fine and in good preservation. Her age was about forty, though she looked three or four years older; but her hair was unstreaked with silver and her form, though very thin, was perfectly erect. Her apparel, consisting of deep black, was of good but not of costly material, and altogether there was an air about her which showed that she had been well bred, and at one time in her life accustomed to good society.

"That man whom I love, despite of all his cruelty toward me," she murmured to herself, as she emerged from the evergreens and looked in the direction where Bernard Audley had just disappeared through the iron gate at the farther extremity of the avenue, "and he calls me his evil genius! It is true that I seldom appear before him save when it is necessary to rescue him from some new crime, or prevent him from making new victims. Ah! although I have from time to time thus started up, as it were, in his presence, and rushed betwixt himself and the object of his lust, yet does he little suspect how constantly and how unweariedly I follow him about. And now again do his passions madly impel him to rush upon destruction. But I must save him, yes, and save also that sweet creature, the broken-hearted Melissa's daughter, whom he would thus immolate to his frenzied desires."

While she was thus musing, the lady became aware that some one was advancing from behind. She mechanically

turned and beheld another lady, also dressed in deep black, and also with a profound shade of mournfulness upon her countenance. She was about forty-six years old and possessed the remains of a beauty that must have once been truly splendid. She was still a very fine woman, stout and portly, with a commanding air that was natural to her, and which was visible enough despite her mourning garments and the sorrow of her looks.

The lady in black whom we represented as having emerged from the evergreens gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of astonishment on beholding this other lady who had just entered the avenue, and whom she evidently recognized. Then, as the attention of the latter was at once drawn by this ejaculation toward her who had uttered it, the recognition was instantaneously mutual.

"Anne!" exclaimed the one who had emerged from the evergreens.

"Lilian!" said the other, who was indeed Mrs. Owen, of Richmond. "Is it you?"

"Yes, it is I, Anne, your unhappy sister, the victim of Bernard Audley," responded Lilian Halkin, for such was the name of her whom in previous parts of the history we have denominated the lady in black.

Then the sisters took each other's hand in a melancholy and remorseful manner, as if this present meeting irresistibly carried their memories back to long past years, over which they retrospected with regret; and though there was something tender and pathetic in the way in which they held each other's hand and gazed upon each other's countenance, they did not embrace. There was no enthusiastic joy in the meeting, but a profound melancholy; and as they thus surveyed each other and mutually marked the changes which time had wrought in their appearance since last they met many years ago, it was easy to read in their looks how deeply at that instant went the conviction in unto their souls that their lives had not been such as they ought to have been, and that it would prove but a mournful and regretful task to compare notes in that respect with each other.

"And you recognized me at once, Lilian?" said Mrs. Owen.

"Yes. But you, should you have recognized me had

your attention not been drawn toward me by the cry that I uttered on meeting you here? "

"I should have known you, Lilian; but you are greatly altered," answered Mrs. Owen, still surveying her sister with a mournful interest.

"Ah! it is not so much the lapse of time," answered Lilian, shaking her head slowly and sorrowfully, "as blighted love and the consciousness of crime."

"Crime?" ejaculated Mrs. Owen, with a shudder. "Then it was true? Heavens! do not say so, Lilian."

"Yes, alas, too true," responded the unhappy woman. Then sweeping her eyes up and down the avenue to assure herself that there were no observers and no listeners, she said, "Too true, indeed. The poor innocent, in a paroxysm of frenzy I killed it."

"Oh, but it was not deliberately done?" Mrs. Owen hastened to observe, anxious to suggest an excuse for her sister's crime, even though it should be an imaginary palliation.

"Heavens, no! I was wild and mad at the moment," cried Lilian. Then, in a slower and more solemn voice, she added, "But the crime is not the less rankling here," and she laid her hand upon her heart. "Though acquitted through a flaw in the indictment, how could I show my face to those again who knew me? No, not even to my own sisters dared I appear."

"And yet, Lilian, we cast you not off," observed Mrs. Owen; "for neither I nor Melissa were prudes, and Lydia was too good, too virtuous, too noble-hearted, not to have received you with open arms."

"I dare say you have long thought me dead?" said Lilian, in a melancholy tone, and after a pause.

"I feared so. What else could I think? But what of Lydia? Have you ever obtained any tidings of her? What has become of her?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"She lives, and to say that she lives," replied Lilian, "is to express the very outside."

"What mean you?" demanded Mrs. Owen, with mingled impatience and astonishment.

"I mean," was the response, "that our sister Lydia is alive, but that she is utterly unconscious of everything which passes around her. Paralysis has for three years past

stretched her helpless, deprived of speech, and with the light of the mind's lamp extinguished within her."

"Heavens! what do I hear?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "But where does she dwell? Who tends upon her? In what circumstances is she placed? What has become of Melissa's children?"

"One is with her," answered Lilian; "the other is, I believe, in London, but I know not where or for what purpose."

"But where dwells our afflicted sister? Under what name?" inquired Mrs. Owen, painfully excited.

"Under the name of Stanley —"

"Stanley!" ejaculated Mrs. Owen, almost reeling with the amazement that now struck her. "What, in a cottage somewhere in the suburbs — this way?" and she pointed in the proper direction.

"Ah! you know it then?" exclaimed Lilian, now equally struck with surprise.

"I am going thither at this moment," answered Mrs. Owen. "They offered me a guide at the hotel, but I preferred proceeding thither alone, in order that I might compose my thoughts, or, rather, prepare them for an interview of a very, very painful character."

"Ah! I begin to understand," cried Lilian. "I had heard that a Miss Owen was staying with Louisa Stanley, but it never once struck me that she was your daughter. And is it so?"

"Yes, it is so. But surely these young girls," added Mrs. Owen, in a musing tone, "cannot have discovered that they are, as it were, related, that they would be cousins, if their births were legitimate. No, it is impossible."

"And you are going, then, to the cottage?" said Lilian, still gazing in amazement upon her sister, but not heeding her last remarks.

"Do you know what has happened, Lilian?" asked Mrs. Owen, now bursting into tears. "Are you aware of the dreadful things which have occurred on the Continent?"

"At Geneva? Yes. I read it all in the newspapers, and I knew full well that those were your daughters. I remembered the Christian names of the two eldest, Agatha and Emma, but the third, and this one that is now staying with Miss Stanley, were born after you and I ceased to see each

other. I never knew their Christian names. Alas! poor Anne, you are now in mourning, as I have been during many, many long years, for when I had passed through the terrible ordeal of a trial for murder," — and the unhappy lady shuddered visibly as she spoke, — " I recorded a solemn vow that sable garments should clothe me until the day of my death. My heart was destined to be in mourning from the instant that the last cry of my dying child rang through my brain, and I resolved that in mourning weeds also should my body continue wrapped until laid in the cold tomb."

" But how have you lived? Where have you been for so many, many years? " asked Mrs. Owen.

" Oh, I see, my dear Anne," exclaimed Lilian, " that we have much, very much, to say to each other; and you are doubtless anxious to behold your daughter."

" Yes, if she will pardon me," murmured Mrs. Owen, again melting into tears. " For it was my wickedness which has led to this fearful catastrophe at Geneva; it was I who placed my poor daughters in that career which has led to such awful consequences. One murdered by the assassin's knife, the other two hopeless idiots in a madhouse."

" Ah! but is it possible that you were the cause? " exclaimed Lilian, shrinking back aghast. " Is it of such horrors that you accuse yourself? "

" All too true! " rejoined Mrs. Owen, her voice convulsed with sobs.

" But in what career of wickedness were they placed? " asked Lilian. " The newspapers, as you must be aware, gave the most meagre outline of the particulars, — little more, indeed, than a bare narrative of the catastrophe itself."

" Because such grave matters and important interests were concerned therein," answered Mrs. Owen, " that the journals dared not chronicle all that transpired. However, upon this point I will tell you more when we meet again."

" But where shall we meet again, and when? " asked Lilian.

" Where do you live? " inquired Mrs. Owen. " I am for the moment staying at the Fountain Hotel; but I propose to take Mary with me, if she will return to that mother

whose crimes have been so great, and proceed with her to the Continent, to visit Geneva and see her poor sisters."

"My home is for the present," answered Lilian, "at a humble peasant's cottage a few miles hence."

"But have you never been to see your poor sister Lydia?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"Never," replied Lilian. "After the frightful thing which happened to me years ago, I vowed that I would never go near my sisters again, much less her who was pure and virtuous and good."

"But there are vows, my dear Lilian, which ought not to be kept," said Mrs. Owen, "and this is one. Had you been faithful to that oath, you would not have accosted me just now."

"Ah! but I was so taken by surprise, so amazed, at seeing you here," said Lilian Halkin.

"But you will not persevere any longer in thus absenting yourself from the bedside of a sister who is so cruelly afflicted?" urged Mrs. Owen.

"Perhaps I should long ago have forgotten my vow and flown to that cottage," said Lilian, "but how could I proclaim myself to be the sister of her who passes by the name of Miss Stanley without also being compelled to embrace the young and innocent Louisa as a niece? Then what questions would she put to me, and what could I say? How account for never having been thither before? No, it is impossible."

"And yet," returned Mrs. Owen, "I am about to visit that cottage; and, after all that you have told me, I must announce myself as the poor bedridden Miss Stanley's sister, and consequently as Louisa's aunt. And yet perhaps," she exclaimed, as a sudden idea struck her, an idea from which she recoiled aghast, "my own daughter Mary may have whispered in the ears of her young friend Louisa such things concerning her mother as to prejudice that excellent girl against me."

"Then, under all circumstances, pause and reflect," said Lilian, earnestly, "as to the course you will adopt. Go and fetch your daughter away, but make no revelation to Louisa to-day. Appear before her only as Mrs. Owen, the mother of Mary. Then, when alone with your daughter, you can ascertain from her lips to what extent her revelations may

have prejudiced the young and artless Louisa against you. For, oh, let us not mar that sweet girl's happiness by announcing ourselves to her as relations whom she cannot love and for whom she must blush."

"Lilian, you have spoken wisely," said Mrs. Owen, "and I will follow your advice. To-day I shall have a long and serious discourse with my daughter Mary. Will you come to me to-morrow at the hotel, and we will confer further how to act."

"Yes, I will visit you some time in the course of to-morrow," replied Lilian. "Till then adieu, my dear sister."

"Adieu," said Mrs. Owen, and ere they parted they kissed each other.

Mrs. Owen then continued her way toward the cottage, in pursuance of the directions which she had received in answer to the inquiries made at the hotel.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Having experienced no difficulty in finding the cottage, Mrs. Owen opened the little garden gate, and was advancing up to the front door, when an ejaculation of surprise not unmixed with joy thrilled through the open casement of the parlour, and in another instant Mary Owen came bounding forth and threw herself into her mother's arms. She was in deep mourning, as we have already stated, and therefore Mrs. Owen saw at once that she was no stranger to the catastrophe which had occurred at Geneva. But that Mary would have already learned the particulars of that dire tragedy, she had foreseen from her knowledge of the fact that Jocelyn Loftus, who was Louisa's lover, and of course in correspondence with her, was at Geneva at the time it occurred.

"My dearest Mary," murmured Mrs. Owen, in a voice well-nigh suffocated with emotions, "can you, will you forgive your unhappy mother?"

"O heavens! do you ask me such a question?" cried Mary, as the tears rained down her cheeks. "Are we not already sufficiently unhappy?"

"Let us step aside somewhere, that we may talk together," said Mrs. Owen, hastily, "for I have much to say to you ere I see that kind young lady who has given you an asylum."

"Come this way, my dear mother," said Mary, and taking her parent's hand, she led her along the gravel walk to an arbour in the remotest corner of the garden. Then, as they placed themselves upon the bench that was embowered with foliage, she said, "Here may we converse without restraint."

"Embrace me once more, my dear little Mary," said Mrs.

Owen. Then, as she strained her youngest daughter to her bosom, she cried, with much fervour, "Thank God for having preserved you to comfort me!"

For some minutes neither mother nor daughter could give utterance to another word, so profound was their grief, so convulsive were the sobs that rent their bosoms, so deluging were the tears that they shed. Again and again did Mrs. Owen clasp Mary in her arms, for the worldly-minded woman was fearfully chastened by the awful catastrophe in which her intrigues and machinations had plunged her other three children.

"And you tell me, Mary, that you can forgive me?" she said, at length. "Ah! it is a sad thing for a mother to be compelled to ask pardon of her daughter. But I know and I feel deeply, deeply, that I have been very wicked, that my conduct has been horrible —"

"Oh, my dear mother, speak not thus," interrupted Mary, lavishing the most tender caresses upon her wretched parent. "And yet in one sense I am overjoyed to hear you use such language. Forgetting the sad past so far as you yourself are concerned, I now feel that I have again a mother whom I can love and cherish."

"Mary, you possess the kindest of hearts," murmured Mrs. Owen, profoundly affected; and all this woman of the world's emotions were now as genuine and as sincere as for so many years of her life her hypocrisies had been well sustained. "But whenever you look upon me, shall you not shudder as you think that it was I who sent your sisters forth upon that fatal mission which has consigned one to an early grave and plunged the other two into mad-cells?"

"O Heaven! I cannot bear to think of it," cried Mary, with a strong shudder convulsing her entire frame. "But, ah! I charge not all this, my dearest mother, against you. Full well do I know that little indeed could you foresee so frightful a catastrophe."

"O God, no!" rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But now I ask you, Mary, will you be content to leave this peaceful asylum which was so generously granted you when compelled to fly from your own mother's care, will you return to this poor mother, now that she is bereaved, stricken down with the strong hand of affliction?"

" Oh, it is my duty to return to you," cried the young maiden, in a fervid tone.

" No, not even your duty, Mary," replied her mother, " for by my conduct have I severed every bond which ought to have linked us together. And to prove to you that I am not selfish now, but that in order to make all possible atonement for the past, I will consent to any sacrifice for the present or the future, I leave you entirely your own mistress, I exact nothing from you, I give you free permission to remain here under that hospitable roof where you have found a home."

" Oh, talk not thus, my dearest mother," exclaimed Mary. " It is not only my duty, but also my inclination to return to you, and to go with you wheresoever you may choose."

" Decide not too hastily," said Mrs. Owen. " I know, and deeply feel, how great my wickedness has been, and not the least portion of its punishment is the present humiliation which as a mother I endure before you, my daughter. Indeed, it will be a long, long time, ere I can look you in the face without shame, and never without remorse. For I shall think of how I would have sacrificed you to the same vile selfishness which has led to the awful catastrophe that has plunged us both into tears and mourning."

If Mary Owen did not interrupt her mother in the midst of this last speech, it was because she was too deeply convulsed with grief to be able to give utterance to a single word. But again did she throw herself into her parent's arms, and in broken sentences did she say, " Do not speak to me thus; I cannot bear it. Ah! my dear mother, for whatever you have done you are terribly punished, and it is now for me to do all I can to soothe and console. It will be a long, long day, dear mother, yes, a long, long day, ere you and I shall know happiness again. But still, still, we may have the satisfaction, the mournful satisfaction of mingling our tears together."

" Dearest Mary, you have already comforted me much," said Mrs. Owen, clasping the amiable girl passionately to her heart. " I scarcely hoped for such demonstrations of love and tenderness and filial devotion as these. It is far more than I deserve. But rest assured, dear Mary, that so long as I may be spared to you in this world will I prove as good a parent as I have hitherto been a bad one."

" What more can you say, my dear mother, or what more can I ask? " murmured Mary.

" But now tell me, my dearest child," resumed Mrs. Owen, after a long pause, " tell me to what extent that excellent young lady, Miss Louisa Stanley, has been prejudiced against me? I ought not to say prejudiced, because anything you may have told her I full well deserved — "

" Rest assured," interrupted Mary, " that I have spared my mother as much as possible in the communications I have made to Miss Louisa Stanley. Mr. Loftus knows more, far more, indeed, all; but, for many reasons, as such as it was possible to suppress was kept veiled from the knowledge of Louisa. Ah! I understand, my dear mother," Mary exclaimed, as a sudden idea struck her, " you are afraid that Louisa will not welcome you here as warmly as you would naturally wish? But she is the kindest-hearted, the most forgiving, and the most amiable being in existence; and if I only breathe a few words in her ear to say how sorry you are for all the past, and what tender things you have promised me for the future — But stay, my dear mother, do not move; I will return to you in a minute."

Thus speaking, the young damsel hurried away and re-entered the cottage. In a few minutes she came forth again, accompanied by Louisa Stanley, and together did the two charming girls hasten to the spot where Mrs. Owen was seated. She rose, however, the moment Louisa was introduced by Mary into her presence, and then she saw at once, by the welcome which the amiable young lady gave her, that Mary's representations had indeed been as efficacious as she had predicted.

" Mrs. Owen, I need scarcely say how glad I am to find that my young friend Mary has at length regained a mother," and as Louisa thus spoke, with tears in her eyes, she offered Mrs. Owen her hand.

" But to you, dearest young lady, what boundless gratitude is due! " exclaimed Mrs. Owen. " I have not words to express all I feel," and she raised to her lips the hand which she clasped in her own. " You gave an asylum to my daughter when compelled to fly from her natural protectress."

" Oh, let us not talk of the past," cried Louisa, with amiable earnestness. " I know, madam, how deeply, deeply

you have been afflicted, — your garb proclaims that you are aware of the sad occurrence, — and whatever words may flow from my lips should rather be to console than to wound your heart. Again I say, therefore, let us draw a veil over everything that has gone by, so far indeed as it is possible. And now tell me, are you really going to take my dear Mary away from me immediately? "

" My dear Louisa, for so you must permit me to call you," said Mrs. Owen, " your own good sense and kind feeling will enable you to understand that there is a duty which Mary and I have to perform. In two or three days we must leave England," added Mrs. Owen, solemnly, " and repair to Geneva."

" Yes, I understand full well that you must proceed thither," observed Louisa. " When do you think of setting off? "

" In two or three days," repeated Mrs. Owen. " I will not be so unjust as to separate Mary from you altogether in a moment, for she loves you as dearly and as fondly as if you were her sister."

" And I love her equally in return," said Louisa, and the two amiable girls threw their arms around each other's waist and thus sat by Mrs. Owen's side upon the bench. " Will you not, my dear madam," continued our sweet heroine of the cottage, " remain here with me for the rest of this day? "

" Yes, Louisa, I cannot refuse your kind invitation," answered Mrs. Owen, " but I must take Mary away with me this evening, for, as you may suppose, we have many, many things to converse upon. To-morrow we shall come back again to visit you."

" Then you must remain here until the last moment to-night," said Louisa, in the warmth of generous hospitality toward Mrs. Owen and of affectionate friendship for Mary. " I shall not part with you till ten o'clock, and then the servant shall accompany you as far as your hotel and take such necessaries as Mary may want for her immediate use. Is this an arrangement? "

" It is," answered Mrs. Owen. " As frankly and cordially as the kind invitation is given, do I accept it."

" And now," said Louisa, " let Mary and me introduce you into the cottage. It is humble enough, but the welcome

I give you is all the more cordial on that account. Refreshments are now served up, and you must accompany us."

Thereupon the two young ladies led Mrs. Owen into the cottage.

Meanwhile the Reverend Bernard Audley, concealed behind the impenetrable verdure of the thick hedge which bordered the garden, had overheard every syllable of the preceding conversations. Not that he had cared much for what passed between Mrs. and Miss Owen, but the melody of Louisa's voice had sunk down like the most delicious music into the depths of his soul. Ah! if that divine harmony — for what harmony is more heavenly than the music of a lovely woman's fluid voice — had touched some generous chord in his heart, or had awakened the better feelings of his nature, happy should we be indeed to record the fact. But it was not so. Everything that was divine and pure and chaste and angelic about Louisa Stanley, in her look, her conduct, her gestures, or her voice, and which would have disarmed every other libertine in the world, only added fuel to the fire that raged in the breast of Bernard Audley. For the first time the lion did not sink down crouching and subdued in the presence of a virgin in her purity and her innocence.

Yes, all that had passed was overheard by the minor canon of Canterbury Cathedral, and as with greedy ears he drank in the details of that arrangement which was made relative to Mrs. Owen's stay until the evening, he felt a galvanic glow thrill through his veins as Satan whispered in his ear that the opportunity he coveted would then be within his reach. Hurrying away from the vicinage of the garden, he repeated the details of that arrangement to himself.

" Mrs. Owen and her daughter will stay until ten o'clock. They will then take their departure, accompanied by the maid servant. Lousia Stanley will remain alone in the cottage for at least an hour. Alone? Yes; for what is the old aunt, bedridden, dumb, and deprived of her senses? " and as he thus mused within himself he felt the devilish prompting again stir in the depths of his soul.

He sped away from the neighbourhood of the garden, not returning at once into Canterbury, but hurrying across the fields in order to be alone with his thoughts, so that he might

with less restraint ponder upon the course he had resolved to adopt, and feast his imagination with the triumph which he hoped to achieve.

"And, after all, why should I not dare everything?" he mused aloud. "Again and again do I declare that she is worthy any peril and any danger that it may be needful to run. Besides, when vanquished and subdued in my embrace, when dispossessed of the flower of her virginity, will she make known her shame to the world? Or will she cherish it as a secret not to be whispered even in the solitude of her own chamber, nor to be breathed even in a prayer to Heaven? Yes, she will shrink from the bare idea of proclaiming her disgrace. She will not risk the loss of her lover, whom she adores so fondly. It will be the first lesson which the now innocent and artless one must take in the ways of hypocrisy, — those ways in which all women become initiated sooner or later. Yes, and I will be her preceptor in the school of love's delights and duplicity's precautions."

The miscreant! he judged the rest of mankind by his own foul and polluted heart, and he formed his opinion of the female sex from those profligate creatures who, at various times, throughout his depraved career, had been the partners of his debauchery. His notions, too, were chiefly based upon his experiences in that aristocratic sphere to which he himself belonged, and amongst many of the female scions of which he had enjoyed great success, for his handsome person had been a great recommendation, and the sanctity of his profession as a minister of the gospel had rendered it safe, as it were, to intrigue with him. From all these circumstances his opinion of the female sex was not of the loftiest description, and the arguments which he used to confirm his resolve in attempting one last and (as he hoped) crowning outrage against Louisa Stanley, showed how little he was enabled to appreciate or understand the purity of that sweet maiden's soul. He did not forget that she had frankly communicated the former outrage to her lover Jocelyn, but then he thought to himself that she had adopted this course because of escaping pure and immaculate, and not having to blush in the presence of her admirer when making the revelation, much less having to fear that she would lose him altogether. Therefore Bernard Audley's argument was, that if her disgrace were utterly consummated,

then she would not dare make any confession to her lover, but would hush it up and lock the secret carefully in her own bosom. Heavens! how little, we repeat, did he understand that excellent girl!

While thus giving free vent to the thoughts that were hurrying him on toward the crime that he meditated and the risk which he endeavoured to palliate, he reached the Dane John once more by a circuitous route; and as he entered the avenue he was immediately confronted by Lilian Halkin, who rose from a seat half-embowered in the shade of the trees and the dense evergreens.

"Ah! is it you?" exclaimed Audley, an expression of mingled hatred and annoyance suddenly appearing upon his countenance. Then, as an idea flashed to his mind, and he recollected the rustling of the evergreens which had alarmed him in the midst of his soliloquy when in that same place a couple of hours previously, he said, "You have been watching me?"

"Yes, to save you from the perpetration of a crime that will plunge you into ruin," answered Lilian, in a voice that was firm and steady, though profoundly mournful.

"What crime? To what do you allude? How dare you address me thus?" demanded the minor canon, putting these questions for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent he might have committed himself, when so unguardedly speaking aloud, to the knowledge of her whom he considered his evil genius.

"Scarcely two hours have elapsed since in this very avenue you gave utterance to the wild ravings of your passions," and as Lilian thus spoke, she fixed her eyes with a look of steadfast warning and reproach upon the minor canon. "Louisa Stanley has inspired you with a frenzied love — no, not a love. That sacred name shall not be desecrated by being used in such a sense."

"You dare not say that I have conceived any evil design relative to Louisa Stanley," and Bernard Audley darted on Lilian Halkin a glance that was meant to read deep down into her soul.

"And you dare not deny the conception of such design," was her immediate response.

"At all events, I am not responsible to you for my conduct," he retorted, fiercely.

"Nor have you the power to prevent me from doing my best to save that innocent girl from your horrible machinations."

A dreadful expression of concentrated fury passed over the countenance of Bernard Audley, and he was about to give vent to some bitter words, perhaps even imprecations, but, checking himself, he said, in as mild a tone as he could possibly assume, "Lilian, why do you interfere with me? I do not like to threaten you, but you really provoke me beyond endurance. Do you forget that you are altogether dependent upon me — I will not say my bounty."

"Bounty!" she echoed, in a strange, wild voice, while her eyes flashed sudden fires. "Would you now taunt me with my dependence upon you for the morsel of bread that I eat? Think you that if you possessed all the treasures of the universe and were to lavish them upon me, you could compensate for that wreck of hopes which you have made and that blight of affections with which you have stricken me? There are moments when I hate you with a fiendish and malignant hatred, as much as at other times I still love you deeply and devotedly. But mark me well, Bernard Audley, there are likewise moments when I feel so horrible a sensation in my brain that it appears as if I were going mad, and in these intervals do I hate you with the most rancorous hatred, loathe you with the intensest loathing. If, then, by word or deed on your part, you only give the slightest impulse to these fevered thoughts of mine, if you only goad me one hair's breadth beyond the point of wretchedness and misery up to which my soul has been already tortured, I shall hate you without mitigation, loathe you without an interval of softness. Then, in that case, if you drive me mad altogether, I shall do you a mischief, I shall wreak upon you that vengeance which any other woman having endured such wrongs as mine would have mercilessly and pitilessly wreaked long years ago."

There was a power in the lady's words and a wild glaring in her eyes which struck Bernard Audley with dismay. Transfixed to the spot and dumb with consternation, he neither moved nor spoke during the lengthy speech which his victim addressed to him; and when she concluded he still continued gazing upon her in a sort of stupor and bewilderment of terror, not knowing how to act or what to say.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" said Lilian, speaking with less excitement but perhaps with more real bitterness in her words as she thus resumed her address. "Bernard Audley, I know you well, and reading your wicked heart so accurately as I do, it is a wonder that I am even able to love you at all, and to think of you with an affectionate interest which is at times as deep as it was when first you won my attachment. Think you that I comprehend not the motive that has hitherto induced you to allow me the pittance which I receive yearly at your hands? It is not bestowed upon me through love, but because you stand in terror of me. You call me your evil genius, and why? Is it because I have more than once saved you from perpetrating crimes that would perhaps have sent you to the scaffold? Is it because I have saved you from becoming the ravisher of innocence? We were speaking ere now of Louisa Stanley. What, think you, would have been your fate had I not interposed in time to prevent the crowning catastrophe in the cathedral crypt? And have you forgotten how I wrote an earnest and prayerful letter to the young maiden, beseeching her to keep the outrage secret and spare you an exposure which would have driven you from the Church, stripped your gown from your back, and despoiled you of the means of existence? Ah! so far from being your evil genius, I have been your good genius. And now, because I again step forward to warn you against giving unbridled license to this frenzied passion which you cherish for Louisa, you upbraid me, you taunt me with my dependence upon you; and in your very words is there a covert threat that you will withdraw my pittance if I continue to interfere with your pleasures. Unhappy man, does no warning voice whisper in your soul that those pleasures, if such they be, may conduct you to ruin and disgrace?"

"Lilian," said Bernard Audley, who during this second speech had found leisure to regain his composure, "I do not wish to anger you, nor am I desirous that disagreeable words should pass between us. But since we thus stand confronted once more, and you have spoken your mind so plainly, since, also, you have chosen to refer in such pointed terms not only to the past, but likewise to our relative positions, let me once for all beg and entreat that you will abstain from any further interference in my pursuits. I have long, long ceased to meddle with yours."

"Yes, because you are heartless and indifferent," exclaimed Lilian, bitterly, "whereas I, throughout a long series of twenty years, have still loved on."

"Then if all these watchings and pryings and peerings result from love," exclaimed Bernard Audley, with mingled passion and scorn, "for Heaven's sake give up loving altogether."

"Ah! do not say that!" cried Lilian, a visible shudder sweeping over her frame, as if she felt the influence of a power which she had ever struggled to ward off. "Do not say that, or it may be I shall follow your advice. Snap but one chord, the last which vibrates in my heart, and this love of mine will dissolve suddenly — no, not dissolve, it will turn into the bitterest hatred."

"I care not," ejaculated the minor canon, his rage now becoming ungovernable. "I detest the sickly sentimentalism which you prate about. Love, indeed! there can be none between us. Circumstances destroyed it long, long ago. It is a morbid feeling of jealousy and disappointment which impels you thus to hang upon my footsteps and interfere in my pursuits. I am sick of it, I am wearied of it, and this day, after all you have said, I am more than ever resolved to rid myself of your impertinent supervision."

"Bernard, this to me?" said Lilian, in a voice of mingled astonishment and reproach, as if she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes, this to you," retorted the minor canon, almost maddened with the rage that had flamed up in his soul. "You yourself have provoked the present crisis. It was not I who sought it. You say that I dwell in fear of you? Well, your words prove the morbid hankering which you have to rule me by terrorism. Now, then, let this bond be broken at once. Do your worst, I defy you. Whatever evil you can say of me, must your own name be mixed up in. And now beware how you continue to molest me. By Heavens! I will do you a mischief the next time you cross my path. As for your income, that shall be paid regularly as heretofore — "

"Enough!" suddenly ejaculated Lilian, her pale countenance having become ghastly, her lips white and quivering, her whole frame convulsed with the agonizing feelings that raged in her bosom. "Enough! you have said your worst,

and you have even dared to threaten your worst. Ah, you will do me a mischief? Then perish all love, and welcome the phase of hatred. Yes, hatred immitigable, unrelieved by a single gleam of tenderness, a hatred that shall arise upon the ruins of withered affections and the best feelings of the heart. As for the pittance you promise to vouchsafe unto me henceforth as heretofore, I scorn it, I repudiate it, I reject it with contempt and abhorrence. Sooner would I drag myself, a miserable mendicant, through the streets and plunge deep down into penury's most hideous slough, than receive another morsel of bread at your hands. Ah, the crisis is indeed come! Farewell, Bernard Audley. We shall meet again, but when next I stand before you, it will not be with the remnants of a long devoted love in my heart, but with all my wrongs raising the cry of vengeance in my soul."

Thus speaking, Lilian Halkin darted away from the minor canon's presence, and disappeared behind the dense foliage of the evergreens. For a few moments did Bernard Audley remain transfixed to the spot, gazing in the direction where she had thus disappeared, and more than half-inclined to call her back, for he felt, indeed, he feared, that he had gone too far, and that he had unnecessarily given provocation to a spirit the wild, strange nature of which he full well knew from past experience. But his pride would not permit him to raise his voice and speak the word of conciliation that might perhaps have recalled her, and at length moving away from the spot where the above scene had taken place, he muttered to himself, " Well, after all, it is perhaps for the best. She may cool down, she may think better of her menaces, and besides, in her foolish fondness she could not altogether find it in her heart to do me harm. Let me banish her from my thoughts, and think only of the adorable Louisa Stanley, whom I shall possess to-night."

CHAPTER XV

THE MAIDEN'S CHAMBER

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Bernard Audley issued forth from his house in the immediate neighbourhood of the cathedral, and, taking a circuitous route, bent his way toward the cottage which he had marked to be the scene of an infamous crime and an immense triumph.

At short intervals he stopped and looked searchingly around to make sure that he was not watched or dogged by Lilian Halkin, and as the night was clear and beautiful, he could see to a considerable distance. Feeling certain that he was not observed nor followed, he pursued his way with increasing hope and confidence, his passions inflamed to an ungovernable extent by the wine which he drank after dinner. He was therefore not merely resolved to gratify these passions if opportunity should serve as he expected, but he had made up his mind, with a sort of desperation, to dare everything, almost to sacrifice everything, sooner than be baffled or disappointed.

In this mood was it that the minor canon arrived, at about half-past nine, in the close vicinage of the cottage, and concealing himself in the shade of the hedge that surrounded the garden, he watched for the anxiously expected opportunity. He had now an entire half-hour for sober and deliberate reflection — if he were capable of it; but he was not. His passions were goaded to a degree bordering upon madness; indeed, it was a madness that now inspired him. If occasionally, for an instant, the whispering of fear should arise in his soul and suggest the possibility of terrific consequences, he at once stifled the salutary warning, crushing it, as it were, beneath the iron heel of his indomitable resolve. Thus the half-hour passed without accomplishing any change

in the purpose of this bold, bad man, and as he heard ten o'clock proclaimed from the towers of the numerous churches in Canterbury, he muttered to himself, with a deep feeling of exultation, "The moment approaches."

Scarcely had the iron tongues of time ceased their loud, metallic sounds when the front door of the cottage was heard to open, and sweet, silvery voices were the next instant wafted to the minor canon's ear. Louisa and Mary were bidding each other an affectionate "Good night." Then Mrs. Owen spoke, saying some kind things to Louisa, and lastly, Louisa's voice was again heard, bidding the servant-maid return as speedily as possible after escorting the two ladies to the Fountain Hotel. Then the little party came forth, accompanied by Louisa as far as the garden gate; and in a few moments Bernard Audley beheld Mrs. Owen, Mary, and the servant-maid (whose Christian name, by the bye, was also Mary) issue from that gate and proceed in the direction which they had to pursue. Louisa Stanley walked slowly back into the cottage, her very pace indicating the pensiveness naturally experienced from the loss of a loved friend who had been her companion for the greater part of a year.

The sound of the front door closing reached the minor canon's ear, and a strange glow thrilled through his entire frame as he now saw that the opportunity for which he had so anxiously awaited was at length within his reach. Still he remained for nearly five minutes in his place of concealment, but it was only to watch the movements of Louisa inside the cottage, and of which he could judge by the light burning within. On the upper story there was one window where a light had been shining all the time the minor canon was stationed at his post, and this, he conjectured, must be the chamber tenanted by the aunt. A light had also been burning in the parlour on the ground floor, but soon after Louisa had reëntered the cottage, as above described, this light disappeared, and in another minute was seen glimmering through the curtains of a window adjoining that of the chamber which Bernard Audley calculated to be the aunt's.

"That, then, is the maiden's own room," he said to himself, as through the hedge he surveyed the window where the light, carried up from the parlour, had just glimmered forth. "Now to enter the cottage!"

Hastening away from his hiding-place, Bernard Audley paused for a few moments at the fence skirting the road, in order to assure himself that his evil genius — as he considered Lilian Halkin to be — was not nigh at hand, and perceiving no one, he without further hesitation passed into the garden. At first his intention was to knock at the front door, and as he knew that only one servant was kept, and this servant was now absent, it would be absolutely necessary for Louisa Stanley herself to answer the summons, when he might rush in and take possession of the citadel. But thinking that if it were possible to gain admittance stealthily, creep up to Louisa's chamber, and vanquish her at the moment of stupor and amazement into which his presence would probably throw her, this plan would be much the better one, he hastily made the circuit of the cottage to reconnoitre. There was a back door opening from the kitchen, and this the minor canon at once tried. It yielded to his touch, and with a renewed, or, rather, enhancing glow of exultation, he passed into the cottage. As the dwelling was but small, he experienced no trouble in groping his way from the kitchen to the foot of the staircase, and there he paused for a minute to listen.

He heard light feet moving overhead. These could be only the steps of Louisa Stanley, and he said to himself, "She is going into her aunt's room, perhaps with the intention of remaining there until the servant returns. But no; it was merely to see that her relative was duly cared for. And now she goes back into her own chamber."

He then took off his shoes and crept stealthily as a cat up the carpeted stairs. Fortunately for his design, they creaked not, and noiselessly as any intrusive thief did he ascend to the little landing above. Through a small window shone a sufficiency of light to show him two doors facing each other, and from the observations he had made ere entering the cottage he was at no loss to discover which was the one leading into Louisa's room. For a single instant, and only for an instant, he trembled and wished himself away; but the very next moment the thought that on the other side of that door was the beauteous creature whom he had so long and so ardently coveted made all his passions fire up again with irresistible force. His fingers sought the handle of the door, he turned it. Suddenly he rushed in, and a wild

shriek thrilled from Louisa's lips as she at once recognized the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley.

The young maiden had not begun to prepare for rest when this infamous intrusion took place. She was therefore completely dressed, no article of apparel being laid aside.

The minor canon sprang upon her rather with the violence of a tiger than in the manner of a human being, and, seizing her around the waist, he said, in a hoarse, thick voice, "You are mine, Louisa, you are mine. Nothing can save you."

But again from the young damsel's lips went forth a piercing, rending shriek, a shriek which must have penetrated through wall and floor and ceiling, and would have been heard far beyond the cottage were any one passing at the time.

She struggled desperately to release herself from the iron grasp which Bernard Audley had fixed upon her, and at the very instant that he was about to approach his lips to hers, she seized him by the hair and wrenched back his head with an almost superhuman force. And still her tongue sent forth the wildest cries for help.

"By Heaven! you shall be mine," said the minor canon, in the same hoarse, thick voice of concentrated passion as before, and he placed one of his hands upon Louisa's mouth, in the hope of stifling her cries.

At this instant a door was heard to open violently, and the next moment a form, looking like a ghost from the grave, appeared upon the threshold of Louisa's chamber. The minor canon, stricken with sudden dismay, loosened his hold upon the young damsel, and she, at once breaking from him, rushed wildly toward that spectre-like form, exclaiming, "My aunt! my aunt!"

Miss Stanley, for she indeed it was, habited in her night-clothes, just as she had sprung up from the couch which for three long years she had kept in paralysis and unconsciousness, threw her arms about the neck of her niece, murmuring, "Louisa, dearest Louisa!" Then, as if utterly overpowered by the tremendous effort, she sank down heavily upon the floor.

"Heaven itself wars against me!" exclaimed Bernard Audley; and though through this relapse of the aunt into profound unconsciousness again Louisa was as much as ever

in his power, yet not for worlds dared he lay a finger upon her more.

The feeling that now inspired him was that of an awful superstition. The flame of his maddening passions had been extinguished in a moment, and flying from the room, precipitating himself down the stairs, he rushed from the house as if pursued by some hideous phantom from the grave or some avenging spirit from the world which lies beyond it.

Pause we here for a few moments to explain the phenomenon which had just occurred. As the reader is well aware, it was three years since Miss Stanley (as we had better continue to call her, at least for the present, rather than by her real name of Halkin) was stricken with the paralysis that had deprived her of speech and reason. For those three years had she lived on, utterly unconscious of what was passing around her, for although she retained the faculties of sight and hearing, yet all images that met her eyes were reflected in a brain which comprehended them not, and the same was it with all sounds that reached her ears. But the psychological philosopher and the physiological inquirer need only be appealed to in order to testify unto the fact that even in such a prostrate condition of mind and body as that in which Miss Stanley lay stretched and stricken down for three long years it needs but some incident of a very extraordinary character to dissolve the bonds of paralysis and loosen the mental and physical energies from the shackles placed upon them. So was it in this case. Louisa's piercing shrieks had thrilled through her aunt's brain. The spell was dissolved in a moment, she snapped, as it were, the chains which held her fast, and mechanically, without having her ideas sufficiently collected even to ask herself what it could all mean, she hastened to her niece's chamber. She came in time to save that excellent girl's virtue from the power of the ravisher, in time, too, to save her lips from the pollution of his caresses, and, as we have already seen, the infamous man, stricken with an awful consternation and feeling at the moment that Heaven itself warred against his diabolical purpose, fled precipitately in terror and dismay.

What words can express all the varied emotions which Louisa experienced in those few brief instants which elapsed

while the phase of her deliverance was passing? The sudden appearance of her aunt filled her with ineffable joy, not only in consequence of her own rescue, which it at once accomplished, but likewise because of the wondrous cure which she thus beheld so suddenly effected. But while all terror on account of Bernard Audley was in a moment dissipated, a new source of alarm and anguish at once presented itself, for this dearly beloved aunt, who had risen from her lethargy of three years to save her, had sunk down into unconsciousness once more.

Oh, with what earnest, heartfelt hope, but with what sore misgivings and direful apprehensions also, did Louisa raise her relative from the carpet and bear her to the couch! Then with what anxious suspense did she watch the effect of the restoratives that she hastened to administer, and what joy indescribable expanded in her heart as she beheld the invalid slowly open her eyes, but open them in consciousness!

Sinking down upon her knees by the side of the bed, Louisa murmured, with deepest fervour, "O God, I thank thee for this!"

"Louisa, sweetest, dearest Louisa," said her aunt, in a low voice, and speaking with difficulty, "what has happened? Have I not been dreaming horribly? Methought I heard piercing shrieks."

"Oh, my beloved aunt! Heaven be thanked that you are thus restored to me!" cried Louisa, starting from her knees and embracing her relative with an enthusiasm which was almost wild.

"Restored to you, my dear girl. What mean you?" asked Miss Stanley, gazing earnestly upon the lovely countenance of her niece. "Ah!" she continued, pressing her hand to her forehead as if to collect the thoughts that were in confusion, "I have a feeling here as if something had happened. Yes, there seems to be a gap. I do not remember going to bed last night. Let me think. You and Clara and I were seated together after dinner, we were conversing, and then it seems as if everything had suddenly become a blank. How was it? I do not recollect that we had tea, or that you bade me good night, or that I went up to bed as usual — But heavens, dearest Louisa, you are weeping, weeping bitterly, too. Come, dear child, tell me, what mean these tears?"

Louisa could not speak. She tried to say something, but her voice was choked in sobs. It was indeed a scene profoundly touching for the poor girl. Three years had elapsed since the day of which her aunt had been speaking, that day when she was suddenly stricken down with paralysis, and a blank had indeed from that moment been the interval for her until the present one.

"You have been ill, very, very ill," at length sobbed forth the weeping girl.

"Ill! very ill!" repeated Miss Stanley. Then, after pausing for nearly a minute, as if to ascertain precisely what all her feelings and sensations were, she said, "Yes, I have now a kind of intuitive knowledge that I have been ill, very ill, as you say, my dearest Louisa. Perhaps, then, I have been ill for some days, or it may be for some weeks?"

"Yes, dear aunt," returned Louisa, now wiping her eyes, for that flood of tears had relieved her surcharged heart, "a great many, many weeks, and I wept because it cut me to the very quick to think that a portion of your life should have thus passed away as an utter blank to you, and that now, when you awake to consciousness once more, you should speak of the day on which you were taken ill as if it were but yesterday."

"Louisa, love, you alarm me," said the aunt, looking intently up into her niece's countenance. "Have I, then, been ill so long, so very long?"

"Dear aunt, there is nothing now to alarm you. See, I weep no more. I am happy, yes, Heaven knows I am happy now, and sincerely do I thank God Almighty for this great goodness on his part."

"And I also feel in my soul a deep gratitude to that Providence which has restored me to you," said Miss Stanley, in a very serious tone, "for I know full well how imperiously necessary my life is to the welfare of yourself and dear Clara. But where is Clara? Go and fetch her to me. I long to embrace her."

"Dear aunt, do not excite yourself too much now," said Louisa, not offering to move from the couch by the side of which she stood half-bending over her invalid relative, "for of course I have a great many things to tell you."

"But nothing wrong? Has any evil happened?" asked Miss Stanley, with feverish haste.

"No, nothing, nothing wrong, everything happy and prosperous, so far as we are concerned," and a blush mantled on Louisa's countenance as she felt that her allusion partly referred to her own engagement with Jocelyn Loftus.

"But where is Clara? Why do you not go and fetch her?" asked Miss Stanley, whose sight was yet too feeble to enable her to notice that crimson glow upon her young niece's countenance.

"Clara, my dear aunt, is not at home at this moment. She is staying with some friends, some very kind friends, with whom she has been a year and upwards."

"Louisa!" ejaculated Miss Stanley, actually shivering with affright. "Do you mean me to understand that I have been so long ill, so long insensible?"

"Yes, dear aunt," replied Louisa, softly, "more than that. But pray don't excite yourself; you must not, really you must not."

"Tell me at once, then, dear girl, how long I have been ill, if you would save me from the most torturing suspense."

"I will, dear aunt, I will tell you everything," said Louisa, perceiving how necessary it was to give the required explanations guardedly and gradually. "It is more than a year, but now, thank Heaven, you are recovered at last. It is more than two years, — dear aunt, do not, do not excite yourself, — 'tis three years since you were first taken ill."

"Three years!" repeated Miss Stanley, in a low, hollow voice, as if absolutely dismayed and struck with consternation by the announcement. Then, after a brief pause, during which an almost awful seriousness settled upon her features, she said, "Now tell me, Louisa, tell me truly, — for I hope that on my recovery I find the same good girls whom I left, as it were, when sinking into this dreadful lethargy of three long years, — tell me, I ask, how you have lived in the interval?"

"Dear aunt, we learned from the bank that you had obtained your money from Mr. Beckford in London, and the banker wrote to him. He replied that he would pay us as regularly as he was wont to pay you."

"Ah! thank God!" exclaimed Miss Stanley, evidently experiencing an indescribable relief. "Then you have not been without resources? But now let me look at you, Louisa. Draw back the curtain — more still; stand with your face

so that the light may fall upon it. There, that is as I could wish. And now I feel my sight improving — I can see you as plainly as I was wont. What a charming girl you have grown! Let me reflect. You are twenty. Yes, you are a sweet girl, and God in his mercy be thanked, there is the same unmistakable innocence in your looks, the same purity and chastity and candour upon your brow. Come and embrace me, sweet girl, come to my arms, for again I thank God that I awake to find you all that I could wish."

Louisa kissed her aunt with enthusiastic devotion, and for some time they spoke not, but gazed upon each other in deep and fervid thankfulness for what might be termed a blessed restoration.

"But now," said the aunt, at length breaking silence once more, "tell me what meant that dreadful screaming. For I recollect what it was that must have startled me from my stupendous lethargy. And, ah! was there not some man here?"

"A villain who found his way to my chamber," replied Louisa.

"But who was he?" asked Miss Stanley.

"You would scarcely believe it, aunt," replied the young maiden, "but it is nevertheless true. That man is the Reverend Bernard Audley, one of the minor canons."

"Heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Miss Stanley, her countenance expressing some other feeling besides indignation on her niece's account. "Bernard Audley! and he in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, dear aunt, he is a minor canon of the cathedral," responded Louisa, "and was appointed about eighteen months ago. But do you know him? Why do you gaze upon me in this manner? Do you think I am deceiving you? Heavens! I am incapable — "

"Hush, dear Louisa! not for a moment do I doubt your word. But I am astonished, for that name is indeed full well, too well known to me. Bernard Audley is a villain of the blackest dye."

"And I, dear aunt, have been more than once the object of his persecutions," Louisa observed. "On the first occasion, — it was in the Dane John, he accosted me and was very rude, but I was rescued from his impertinent molestation by a young gentleman, a very excellent young

gentleman. Clara has made all inquiries concerning him, and has ascertained that he is of the highest character — ''

"Ah! I understand," said Miss Stanley, whose sight was now strong enough to enable her to observe the telltale blush upon Louisa's cheeks. "You love him? Well, my dear girl, if he be indeed all that you represent, and you have ascertained that he is so, there is no harm in a virtuous attachment."

"Ah! my dearest aunt, when you come to know Jocelyn Loftus, you will welcome him most kindly," said Louisa, again embracing Miss Stanley. "He will be here in a few days. I had a letter from him this morning, dated from Geneva. It is a very, very sad business which has detained him there; but it was to be all over yesterday, and then he was to leave at once for England. His name is not Jocelyn Loftus — "

"Heavens, what do you tell me?" asked Miss Stanley, all her confidence damped, and naturally so, by this announcement, artlessly and ingenuously though it was made.

"There is nothing to fear, aunt," continued the young damsel. "Through no unworthy motives has Jocelyn Loftus taken this name; and he would have given me all requisite explanations when he was last in England, but he said he would rather postpone them till the eve of our marriage, when he would reveal everything. They are family circumstances which have made him adopt a feigned name; and I, having the fullest confidence and placing the utmost reliance in him, cheerfully consented to wait his own good will and pleasure for those explanations. To-morrow, dear aunt, I will show you all his letters, and then you shall judge for yourself what his character and disposition really are."

"And how long have you known him?" asked Miss Stanley, reassured once more by the frankness with which her niece spoke and the confidence in which she referred to her lover's letters.

"A year, very nearly," replied Louisa. Then casting down her eyes bashfully, and with a blush again mantling upon her countenance, she said, "We should have been married some time ago, and then it was his intention to have you conveyed in a carriage, built expressly for the purpose, to our future home, a beautiful mansion which he possesses

in Northumberland; for, believe me, my dear aunt, that Jocelyn — as we must of course still call him for the present — has ever spoken of you with the kindest interest, and when we have been talking over our future plans, your welfare and comforts have entered largely into the arrangements thus laid down.''

'' I am delighted, my dear Louisa,'' observed Miss Stanley, '' to hear all that you are telling me. Yes, I see that this young gentleman must be honourable and well-intentioned, and I have now no doubt he will give satisfactory explanations for the adoption of a fictitious name. Perhaps he may even turn out to be some one of a more elevated rank than you suppose.''

'' Clara has hinted something to this effect in one of her recent letters,'' said Louisa, '' but I never suffer that idea to dwell in my mind. I do not wish him to be more than he appears. At all events, if he were a prince I should not love him more than I do. And now, my dear aunt, I should mention to you that the business which has taken him to the Continent is in itself of a nature to win your esteem, although it has been connected with some dreadful adventures,'' and Louisa shuddered visibly as she spoke. '' But it was not his fault.''

'' Explain yourself, my dear child,'' said Miss Stanley. '' Do not fear of exciting me too much. I feel strong in body and intellect to a surprising extent, considering all things.''

'' Jocelyn Loftus,'' resumed Louisa, '' went abroad for the purpose of defeating a dreadful conspiracy which was devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which certain young ladies named Owen — ''

'' Ah! Owen? '' repeated Miss Stanley. '' Tell me their Christian names? '' she inquired, eagerly.

'' Agatha, Emma — ''

'' Enough, it is they! '' ejaculated the aunt.

'' What! you know them? You have heard of them? '' cried Louisa. '' This is most strange. You knew Mr. Audley's name; you now know these. But perhaps you will be astonished when I tell you that Mary Owen, the youngest of the four sisters, — and oh, so different from the rest, — has been an inmate of this cottage for the last ten or eleven months.''

"Then do you know who she is?" asked Miss Stanley, in astonishment.

"Yes, the daughter of Mrs. Owen who has hitherto dwelt at Richmond, near London, but who is now in Canterbury, and has been here the greatest portion of this day."

"Louisa, you astound me! Did she tell you anything particular?"

"No, nothing," was the response. "She is very unhappy, and has taken Mary away with her. One of her daughters, Emma, was murdered at Geneva. Agatha and Julia have gone mad."

"Oh, these are indeed frightful things," exclaimed Miss Stanley, with a cold shudder, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. Then, after a long pause, she said, "Has Mrs. Owen left Canterbury? Will she come to see you again?"

"Yes, she will not quit England for two or three days. But hark! I hear footsteps on the stairs," exclaimed Louisa, momentarily frightened by the sound, for she feared lest it should be the minor canon returning; but all in a moment recollecting that the servant had gone out, she said, "It is Mary" (alluding to the domestic) "come back. She has been to escort Mrs. Owen and her daughter to the hotel."

It will be impossible to describe the mingled astonishment and joy with which the faithful servant received the intelligence that Miss Stanley had in so marvellous a manner shaken off the spell of paralysis and regained possession alike of her physical powers and her mental energies. But when she heard the adventure which had led to this sudden and almost miraculous recovery, the indignation she experienced that such an outrage should have been offered to Louisa was succeeded by a feeling of enthusiastic joy, as she exclaimed, "Well, miss, after all, we have to a certain extent to thank that wicked clergyman for his intrusion, since you have escaped unharmed, and your aunt has been revived by the occurrence."

Then the faithful servant was admitted into the chamber, and with tears did she offer her congratulations to Miss Stanley for what had taken place.

"My dear Louisa," said the aunt, "you must now retire to rest. Mary will remain with me for the night. Nay, but I insist upon it. You can rise early in the morning and come to me again, for we have still many things to talk about,

and though my curiosity is keenly excited to question you on several points, so that from your lips I may learn all that has happened, even to the minutest details, during this long blank in my existence, yet must I restrain that curiosity until the morrow. I know that I ought not to yield to exciting influences. Indeed, I experience some fatigue already. Therefore, leave me, dearest Louisa. I think that I shall soon go to sleep."

The young maiden accordingly embraced her aunt, and then retired to rest in another chamber.

CHAPTER XVI

APPREHENSIONS AND SUSPICIONS

The opening flowers were giving forth their perfume to the freshness of the morning air, and the churches in the old cathedral city were proclaiming the hour of six, when Louisa Stanley, having risen and performed the avocations of the toilet, noiselessly entered the chamber where her aunt now lay. She met the maid servant who was coming out at the moment, and she saw by that faithful domestic's countenance that there was everything still to hope in respect to the invalid, and that no relapse had taken place. The aunt had passed a good night, and was now awake. She accordingly welcomed her niece with a most affectionate interest, and bidding her sit down by the bedside, said, "We must now, dear Louisa, resume the thread of our discourse where it was broken off last night. We had been talking about Mrs. Owen and her daughters, you remember, when Mary" (alluding to the servant-maid) "came back. I did not choose, after you left the room, to question her relative to a single thing. I not only feared the consequences of a prolonged excitement, but was anxious to receive all explanations from your lips. Let us now speak of Clara."

"Dear aunt," said Louisa, producing a packet of letters, "I have brought you all the correspondence I have received either from my sister or from Jocelyn Loftus. Here it is, entirely at your disposal."

"You are a good girl, Louisa," said Miss Stanley, "and it is to me a source of indescribable comfort and satisfaction to find you thus frank, open-hearted, and ingenuous as ever."

"Without vanity, and without egotism, my dear aunt," said Louisa, in a soft tone, and with genuine sincerity in her looks, "I can conscientiously declare that I have never,

during your long illness, harboured a thought, done a deed, or taken a single step which I should be ashamed for you to know. And now at once, before we speak of aught else, let me confess that I quitted you on one occasion, but not without the deep conviction and assurance that in Mary Owen I left an excellent substitute and kind guardian."

"But whither did you go, my dear Louisa?" asked Miss Stanley, surprised, though neither alarmed nor angered, at the confession which her niece was now making.

"I went to Paris," replied the maiden. "Indeed, I was inveigled thither in a most ungenerous and unhandsome manner by a nobleman named the Marquis of Leveson; and for a time I was rendered very wretched indeed by an attempt which he made to induce me to believe that Jocelyn Loftus was not only unfaithful to me, but also a very bad man. Ah, my dear aunt, I was very, very unhappy then. The marquis brought me back to England, and I was induced to accompany him to London. There he threw off the mask and endeavoured to treat me vilely, aided also by his niece, a lady so very beautiful and seeming so good that I was at first completely prepossessed in her favour. Oh, I shudder when I think how nearly I was destroyed and undone by the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Ernestina Dysart. But Heaven sent a kind friend to my deliverance, and this was done through Clara's instrumentality. Then I saw Clara, and came straight home again to the cottage. Clara convinced me that my suspicions relative to Jocelyn Loftus had been most unfounded. In due course he himself returned from Paris, where he had been kept in prison through the most wicked devices; and he then satisfied me, even if I were not previously convinced, how cruelly he had been wronged by those suspicions. A letter came from the Princess Sophia, requesting him to go to London. He did so, and when he returned he was compelled to set off again for the Continent. This was six or seven months ago, and there he has been ever since. But, as I told you last night, he will be home in a day or two, having fully succeeded in unmasking the conspiracy which had been devised against the Princess of Wales. And now, my dear aunt, I have given you a rapid but faithful outline of all that concerns myself."

"You have indeed passed through many and serious

adventures, my dear girl," said Miss Stanley, "but since you have escaped in security and safety, no cause for regret or sorrow remains behind. I long to see this Jocelyn Loftus, the correspondent as well as the champion of princesses. He must be a noble character. But now tell me everything that concerns Clara. You said last night that she was staying with some kind friends, and that she had been with them a year."

"Did I not name the Beckfords?" asked Louisa, ingenuously.

"The Beckfords!" ejaculated Miss Stanley, with a sort of subdued scream and a convulsive start. "What mean you? There are no such people in existence!" she cried, in the excitement of her feelings, and without pausing to weigh the import of her words.

Louisa gazed upon her in speechless astonishment.

"Ah! since I have thus suffered that revelation to escape my lips," cried Miss Stanley, still fearfully excited, "I will not attempt to recall it."

"But, my dear aunt," said Louisa, now recovering the power of speech, "every letter which I have received from Clara speaks of Mr. and Mrs. Beckford. She is living with them, they have adopted her; it is they who have given her the means of supplying me with money, and indeed it was at their house that I saw Clara when in London."

"What dreadful delusion is all this? What fearful mystery is involved herein," exclaimed the aunt, actually writhing in her couch with the tortures of misgiving and suspense. "The Beckfords' house, you say. But where was it? In what square or street?"

"Oh," returned Louisa, "they have removed some time ago from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street, and it was at this latter place that I saw Clara."

"But did you see any one passing by the name of Beckford?" inquired the aunt, still with the most fevered impatience.

"No, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford were not in town at the moment. But here are Clara's letters, confirming all I tell you," added Louisa, both pained and frightened at the strange manner of mingled incredulity, astonishment, and alarm in which her aunt gazed up at her.

"Let me see them," cried Mrs. Stanley. "Leave all this

correspondence to me. Draw back the window-curtain a little. There, that will do. And now go down, my dear child, and see about the breakfast. Come up to me again presently. But do not be alarmed, dear Louisa, at anything I may have said. I know that you are artless, ingenuous, and good. There is innocence in all your looks."

"Oh, tell me, my dear aunt," exclaimed the young maiden, the tears gushing forth upon her long lashes, "tell me whether you apprehend any harm relative to Clara; for I know not how it is, but your words have excited dreadful misgivings in my mind."

"My dear girl, I dare not conceal from you the fact that there is some mystery which must be cleared up," said her aunt, in a solemn voice. "I am bewildered, I cannot understand it."

"But you said there were no such persons as Mr. and Mrs. Beckford?" exclaimed Louisa, hurriedly.

"There was one who, for certain reasons, bore that name, but it was not his real one." Then after a few moments' pause Miss Stanley asked, "Has Clara ever mentioned to you in her letters a certain Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"Sir Archibald Malvern?" echoed the young maiden. "No, Clara has never spoken of him, but I read in the newspaper, a day or two ago, — for I sometimes borrow a newspaper from the circulating library, especially since those dreadful things occurred at Geneva — "

"But what were you going to tell me?" interrupted the aunt, impatiently. "You read in the newspaper — "

"That a certain Sir Archibald Malvern, whose mysterious disappearance had for more than a year past caused the greatest affliction to his son and to his numerous friends, had been found — "

"Alive?" asked Miss Stanley, with almost a wild quickness.

"No, his remains were discovered in some suburban villa, near London," responded Louisa, "and they were interred accordingly. The paragraph was very brief, and I have given you the substance of it."

"What you now tell me," observed the aunt, "increases the mystery relative to Clara. Ah! I see you are surprised at this intimation that the death of Sir Archibald Malvern, or even the bare mention of his name, can have aught to do with the matters of which we are speaking, but the

ramifications of all these mysteries, for they are many and they are deep," added Miss Stanley, emphatically, " are so strangely interwoven — "

" Oh, you terrify me, my dear aunt," said Louisa. " Can any harm have happened to Clara? " Then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she went on to say, " I do indeed know that London is a very dangerous place and that amongst all classes, but especially the highest, there are great numbers of bad and profligate people. That Lady Ernestina Dysart, the Marquis of Leveson's niece, of whom I spoke just now, was led to tell me — I know not in what strange mood at the time — many strange things about the profligacy of the fashionable world; and she especially quoted as an instance a certain celebrated beauty named Venetia Trelawney, who, by her arts and wiles, had raised herself to the peerage. Having married a gentleman named Sackville, she and her husband — Lord and Lady Sackville — dwell at Carlton House, and she is the great favourite of the prince regent."

" But what, my dear Louisa," interrupted Miss Stanley, " has all this to do with the topics of our discourse? "

" Nothing, except that all that I heard concerning this Venetia Trelawney, or, rather, Lady Sackville," rejoined Louisa, " has for some reason or another, I cannot define what, made a considerable impression on my mind, and has often intruded itself upon my thoughts. Perhaps it was because the wicked example of this Lady Sackville made me fear for my beloved sister Clara, placed as she is in a metropolis abounding with such temptations and she herself being of such a rare beauty. For you know not, dear aunt, how wonderfully Clara has improved. When I saw her, seven or eight months ago, in London, although only after a separation of a like interval, I was struck by that improvement. Ah! I felt so proud of her, for there is really something grand and imposing in Clara's looks. She has become quite the polished lady — and, oh," exclaimed the artless young maiden, her thoughts in their excitement thus rapidly ranging from one topic to another, " what pleasure shall I have in writing to her to-day, to inform her of your recovery and beseech her to return home at once to see you. And she too will be so overjoyed, for you will perceive by her letters what affectionate mention she always makes of you."

"Leave me, then, dear child," said Miss Stanley, "to the perusal of the letters; and when you come up again, in an hour or so, we shall perhaps have some further conversation upon these serious topics."

Louisa accordingly quitted the chamber, and descended to the parlour, where the table was already spread for breakfast. It was now past eight o'clock, and the young maiden placed upon a tray the requisite refreshments for her aunt, and sent them up by the servant. She herself left the morning meal untasted; her heart was filled with a variety of conflicting emotions. She had every reason for satisfaction in her aunt's recovery and in the prospect of her lover's speedy return to England; but, on the other hand, she experienced certain misgivings and uneasy suspicions in consequence of what Miss Stanley had said relative to Clara and the Beckfords. Perhaps the reader will ask what course she intended to take with regard to the Reverend Bernard Audley, and whether she purposed to pass over his vile conduct in silence. This subject likewise entered into the maiden's thoughts, but as Jocelyn Loftus would so soon return to England, she resolved to let the matter stand over until she saw him.

Issuing forth from the parlour, where the untasted meal remained upon the table, she rambled in the garden. At nine o'clock she sent the servant up to inquire whether her aunt was yet prepared to receive her, and the reply brought back was that Miss Stanley had not been able as yet to go entirely through the correspondence. Louisa accordingly remained walking in the garden, and thus nearly another hour passed away. The postman now made his appearance with a letter, and Louisa, on receiving it, at once recognized the writing of her sister Clara. Tearing it open, she read the following lines:

"London, Tuesday Evening,
"July 19, 1815.

"I take up my pen, dearest Louisa, to write you a few hurried words, that you may be prepared to see me to-morrow, Wednesday. I shall leave London at about nine o'clock, and shall be in Canterbury by three in the afternoon. Shortly after that hour you may expect to see me. A circumstance has occurred; a secret, indeed, has come to my knowledge, intimately concerning us both. It is, in short, the secret of

our birth, relative to which there are many strange things that we never knew before. I tell you this much in order that you may be prepared for the revelation I have to make. I shall not come alone. Sir Valentine Malvern, from whose lips I myself have learned that solemn secret, will accompany me.

"But this is not all, dear Louisa. I shall avail myself of the same opportunity to make known certain matters connected with myself; and here, likewise in order to prepare you for this intelligence and to guard you against the too sudden effects of a surprise, I must at once inform you that I am married. Yes, I am married; and the alliance is one which in a worldly point of view may be proclaimed with pride. It is not, however, Sir Valentine Malvern who is my husband, nor, indeed, will my husband accompany me upon the present occasion. But I can say no more now, save and except that I hope to find our beloved aunt as well as under circumstances she possibly can be.

"Ten thousand kisses, dearest Louisa, from

"Your affectionate sister,

"Clara."

Louisa was overjoyed at the receipt of this letter, and the moment she had rapidly scanned its contents, without waiting to reflect upon them, she flew, light as the fawn, up to the chamber where her aunt lay, exclaiming, "Clara is coming home to-day. She will he here between three and four this afternoon. She is married, too, and the alliance is an excellent one."

The aunt, whose countenance wore a look of the utmost seriousness and indeed affliction at the moment when Louisa thus burst into her presence, half-started up in the couch with wonder and excitement as the young damsel gave rapid vent to those ejaculations. Then, taking the letter from Louisa's hand, Miss Stanley hurriedly perused its contents, and sinking upon her pillow, she murmured, "Thank God, whatever may have happened, Clara is married!"

Louisa did not notice that these words were spoken with a feeling of relief produced by the letter, for the young lady was too overjoyed by the prospect of embracing her sister to have eyes or ears for any other subject.

"Are you not glad, aunt, that Clara is coming?" she inquired, "and are you not well pleased that she is married so happily?"

"I am indeed well pleased," answered Miss Stanley, as she flung a look upon the letters, with which the coverlid of the bed was strewn, for the perusal of those letters had filled the worthy woman's mind with the sorest alarm, not merely respecting the welfare, but the integrity, truthfulness, and honour of her elder niece, Clara.

"But what secret is it that she has to reveal?" exclaimed Louisa, "and relative to our birth, too! Surely, dear aunt, you are well acquainted with all that? I never thought there was any mystery at all connected with it. Was not our dear father your brother? Was he not killed in battle during the Flemish campaigns, and did not his loss break our poor mother's heart?"

"Let us not say another word upon this topic now," interrupted the aunt. "Nor, indeed, will we at present renew our conversation upon any topic on which we have previously spoken. I am heartily glad that Clara is coming, for all mysteries, such as they are, and whatever they may be, shall and must now be cleared up. Heaven be thanked that Clara is married!" added Miss Stanley, thus again giving verbal expression to the relief her mind had experienced on her elder niece's account.

CHAPTER XVII

CLARA

It will be recollected that Lilian Halkin had promised Mrs. Owen to call upon her at the Fountain Hotel; and it was accordingly about two o'clock on the day of which we are writing that the former proceeded to that establishment and was introduced into the room where her sister and Mary were seated. Immediately upon making her appearance Lilian raised the dark veil which she was accustomed to wear over her countenance, and walking straight up to Mary, took her by the hand, looked steadfastly at her, and then said, abruptly, but in the soft, mild tone which habitually characterized her voice, " Innocence is written in your features, my dear girl. For Heaven's sake, retain such a goodly imprint for ever."

" Embrace your aunt, Mary," said Mrs. Owen. Then, as the young girl threw herself into Lilian's arms, the mother continued to observe, " Mary knows that you are my sister, knows also that the bedridden invalid on whom she has so often tended is her aunt likewise, and that the charming Louisa who gave her an asylum is her cousin."

" Ah! then you have given your daughter certain explanations? " said Lilian, turning to Mrs. Owen after having affectionately embraced Mary.

" Yes, certain explanations," rejoined Mrs. Owen, with marked emphasis, as much as to imply that those explanations were limited. " Now, dear Mary, you can retire to your own chamber for the present. Your aunt and I have much to talk about, and presently we shall go together to the cottage to see our poor sister. We shall not ask you to accompany us on this occasion, but in the evening it is probable that we will either come back and conduct you

thither, or else get Louisa to send up the servant to fetch you."

"Oh, pray do not disappoint me," exclaimed Mary. "I long to call Louisa by the endearing name of cousin."

"You shall see her again to-day, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen.

Mary then withdrew from the apartment, and the two sisters were left alone together.

"It appears, then," said Lilian, "that you have decided upon making yourself known to Louisa?"

"Yes, I passed all the afternoon and evening in her company after you and I separated in the Dane John, and her conduct was most kind and cordial toward me. Indeed, she is an excellent-hearted girl, and evidently believes that the cruel misfortunes I have experienced in respect to my three eldest daughters are an ample chastisement for all that I have done. And such, indeed, I feel it, for the infliction is great and terrible."

The two sisters then sat down together and conversed for a long time upon many matters. They gave mutual explanations relative to various circumstances which before were only partially known to each other, and which intimately concerned themselves. But as we shall presently have to combine the histories of the four sisters, Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian Halkin, all in one narrative, it is not here necessary to anticipate any portion thereof. Suffice it to say that in sincere penitence for the past did these two sisters mingle their tears together; and their explanations being over, they decided upon at once repairing to the cottage, in order to make known their relationship to Louisa, and also to see their invalid sister, whose restoration to consciousness and comparative health they little suspected.

But in paying this visit they had deemed it better to go alone, there being something solemn and sacred in the proceeding, and they feared lest in any unguarded moment they might let fall from their lips more than they chose the youthful Mary to know. Indeed, when Mrs. Owen had declared that she had given her daughter certain explanations, it was as much as to say that she had revealed nothing of the past beyond the bare fact of the relationships above announced.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin were prepared to issue

forth, when a travelling-carriage and four drove into the courtyard of the Fountain Hotel, and the two ladies paused for an instant at the window of the apartment to observe who should alight. A servant in livery leaped down from the box and opened the door of the carriage. A tall, handsome young gentleman, dressed in deep black, first stepped out, and then assisted a lady to alight. This lady had a veil over her face, but as she descended the steps of the carriage, it blew aside with a sudden gust of wind, and Mrs. Owen, catching a glimpse of the splendid countenance thus revealed, exclaimed, "It is Lady Sackville!"

"What, Lady Sackville, the celebrated court beauty, with whose fame all England has rung?" asked Lilian.

"The same," replied Mrs. Owen. "But see how quickly she replaces her veil, as if she did not choose to be observed by the hotel servants who are thronging about the carriage."

"Do you know her ladyship?" asked Lilian.

"Not to speak to. But I have many times seen her riding in her carriage in London. That is not her husband who is with her. I know Lord Sackville well by sight, and this is not he. Surely it cannot be an elopement?"

"Ah! my dear sister," said Lilian, "let us not suffer our thoughts to be diverted from our own affairs to those of other people. Come, it is three o'clock, let us away to the cottage. Remember, we have promised poor little Mary that she shall see Louisa again this evening."

"Come, then, let us away," said Mrs. Owen.

The two sisters accordingly went forth together. Taking no further notice of the equipage which had just arrived, they passed out from the courtyard of the spacious hotel into the street, and then took the shortest way to the Dane John. This they threaded quickly, and in a very short time reached the cottage.

Louisa, who was anxiously looking from the window of the chamber where her aunt lay to watch for the arrival of her sister, beheld Mrs. Owen, in company with another lady, likewise dressed in black, and she was at once struck with the idea that this other lady was the one who had rescued her a year back from the power of Bernard Audley in the cathedral crypt.

"Who is it?" inquired her aunt, on hearing an ejaculation drop from the young maiden's lip.

"Mrs. Owen, with another lady," replied Louisa. "I will hasten and say what you have told me."

Thereupon she quitted the chamber, and proceeding down-stairs, welcomed Mrs. Owen and her companion into the parlour. Then, before another word was spoken, the delighted girl exclaimed, "My dear aunt has recovered. The paralysis has left her; she has regained the use of her limbs — and, what is better still, the powers of her intellect. She wishes to see you immediately, Mrs. Owen, and has desired me to show you up before any further explanations take place. These are her own words."

The astonishment of Mrs. Owen and Lilian, on hearing such startling intelligence from Louisa's lips, may be conceived more easily than described, and the tears gushed forth from their eyes.

"But how, my dear girl," asked Mrs. Owen, "did this wonderful result come about?"

"First tell me, my dear madam," asked Louisa, "why you have not brought Mary with you? I hope she is not unwell."

"No, I have promised that she shall come in the evening, if it be agreeable to you. But tell me about this wonderful occurrence."

"It happened last night," returned Louisa, "almost immediately after you were gone. Indeed, I would have sent a note or a message to the hotel to make you and Mary acquainted with the circumstance, only I have been expecting you to come all the morning, — and then, too, I have had so many other things to occupy my attention."

"But the way in which the cure was accomplished?" interrupted Mrs. Owen. "Surely the paralysis did not subside altogether in a moment, and of its own accord?"

"No," exclaimed Louisa. "It was a circumstance which for an instance seemed fraught with a terrible danger to me." Then suddenly checking herself, she threw her eyes hesitatingly and timidly upon Lilian, for the impression was still in her mind that this lady was the identical one who had saved her in the crypt and had brought her home on that memorable night in the minor canon's own carriage.

"You regard me as if you thought you knew me?" said Lilian, in her soft, gentle voice. "Ah! I know what idea is uppermost in your mind. Yes, we have indeed met be-

fore," she continued, taking Louisa's hand and surveying her with a mournful but tender interest. " I have to thank you for the forbearance which you showed in compliance with that anonymous note that I left for you — "

" Ah, lady," interrupted Louisa, " and I have to thank you for your timely succour upon that occasion."

" But about your aunt, my dear girl? " Mrs. Owen again observed.

Louisa gave no reply, but once more threw her looks deprecatingly and timidly upon Lilian.

" I begin to understand something," cried this unhappy lady. " A light breaks in upon me. Something has occurred in reference to him again? Speak, Louisa — Pardon me for addressing you thus familiarly, but you will presently learn that I have a right to do so. Speak, I say, fear not, tell us all that occurred."

" Since you desire me, I will do so," said the young maiden. " Last night, Mr. Audley — "

" Ah! " ejaculated Lilian, " I thought so. But go on, go on."

" Mr. Audley stole into the house, gained access to my chamber — "

" The villain! " muttered Lilian, between her set teeth.

" Do not interrupt," hastily whispered Mrs. Owen. Then turning to Louisa, she said, " Proceed, dear girl."

" His behaviour was most rude, most violent," continued our charming heroine, " but my screams accomplished that which the physician's art had for three long years vainly attempted. God would not suffer me to be injured, and those cries which I sent forth startled my aunt from the stupor of lethargy, loosened her limbs from the bonds of paralysis, and brought her in time to save me. Mr. Audley fled, no doubt conscience-stricken — "

" The villain! " again muttered Lilian Halkin. Then for an instant — but only for a single instant — an expression of fierce vindictiveness passed over her countenance.

" This is miraculous, truly wonderful," exclaimed Mrs. Owen, speaking with a kind of religious awe.

" Yes, the finger of Providence is indeed visible therein," observed Lilian.

" But you must now proceed up-stairs and see my aunt," said Louisa, hastily addressing herself to Mrs. Owen. " In-

deed, I have done wrong, perhaps, to detain you even for these few minutes in the parlour, for my aunt emphatically enjoined me to bid you walk up the moment you arrived. You are to go up alone. I am not to accompany you."

"But you will permit this lady, who is my sister," said Mrs. Owen, "to go with me?"

"Your sister?" exclaimed Louisa, in surprise, for Mary had never mentioned to her that her mother had any sisters living.

"Yes, this lady is my sister," rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But you will doubtless know more presently, my dear girl. At all events, she must accompany me."

Louisa offered no objection. It seemed to her that Mrs. Owen knew full well what she was doing; and the maiden moreover perceived that there was in all this proceeding a mystery of which she could form no idea, but which, according to the hints dropped, was presently to be cleared up.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin now quitted the parlour and ascended to the bedroom where Miss Stanley lay. Louisa did not follow, and the door closed immediately behind them. We need not penetrate into that room to describe the meeting of Lydia Halkin (which was Miss Stanley's real name) with her sisters Anne and Lilian, nor will we pause to describe all that took place between them. That the interview was affecting in the extreme may be full readily conceived, for Miss Stanley possessed a kind, a generous, and a forgiving heart, and whatever might have been the errors, the faults, or the crimes of her two sisters, she was not disposed to make them the subject of reproach and anger, but of compassion and pardon.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, during which interval Louisa remained below in the parlour, watching from the window with intense anxiety for the appearance of her sister. Presently her aunt's bell rang; the servant went up in response to the summons, and speedily came down again with the intimation that Louisa herself was wanted up-stairs.

The young maiden, now feeling a presentiment that she stood upon the threshold of the revelation of a mystery, and with a strange fluttering at the heart, ascended the stairs. Upon entering the room she at once saw that her aunt, Mrs. Owen, and Lilian had been weeping, but that there was a degree of affectionate tenderness in their looks which showed

that the interview had not been altogether without its pleasurable feeling.

"Come near, Louisa," said Miss Stanley. "Approach, dear girl. This is the day for revelations and the clearing up of mysteries. Know, then, that these are my sisters, therefore your aunts, and Mary Owen, who has so long been your companion and whom I am now so anxious to behold, is your cousin."

Louisa received these announcements with amazement, but speedily yielding to the impulse of her heart, she embraced first Mrs. Owen and then Lilian. These two ladies, one after the other, folded the sweet maiden in the fondest clasp and lavished upon her the most endearing epithets.

"Now you can retire again, Louisa," said Miss Stanley. "At a convenient opportunity I will explain to you certain things connected with the past which it becomes necessary for you to know. Retire, my dear child, and wait down-stairs to receive her whom you are so anxiously expecting."

The young maiden accordingly withdrew, but at the very instant she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard a knock at the front door. The visitors, whoever they were, had entered the garden gate and had arrived thus far during the scene up-stairs. With a wildly fluttering heart, Louisa opened the door, and the next instant she was caught in the arms of her sister.

"Dearest Clara!"

"Dearest Louisa!"

These were the ejaculations which sprang from their lips, and fervid, rapturous, and enthusiastic were the kisses which they exchanged, their tears also mingling. Then Louisa led her sister into the parlour, not noticing in the fulness of her joy that a tall, handsome young man was standing upon the threshold. He, however, followed the two sisters into the parlour, and with tears also in his eyes did he behold them embrace again and again.

"Oh, my beloved Clara, you have come home at last," murmured Louisa, in a broken voice, "and I am so happy. I received your fond letter — Ah! and I have such good news for you — "

Then she suddenly stopped short, as she observed the tall young gentleman who was standing near.

"Louisa, my dear sister," said Clara, taking her hand

and leading her toward him, " this is Sir Valentine Malvern, whom I mentioned in my letter. Although until this moment a stranger to you, yet when you learn the secret which I am come thus abruptly to breathe in your ears, you will receive him not merely with the kindest welcome, but with such feelings as a sister may experience toward a brother."

" Oh, Clara, what mean you? " asked Louisa, bewildered by her sister's words, and wondering whether they had already expressed her actual meaning in that allusion to sister and brother. " Our dear aunt was strangely affected when speaking of the late Sir Archibald Malvern."

" Louisa — our aunt — speaking? " echoed Clara, now in her turn contemplating her sister with the wildest astonishment.

" Yes, dear Clara, it is indeed all true," said the young maiden. " Last night our beloved aunt was released most miraculously, most providentially, from the spell of unconsciousness."

" Oh, what do I hear? " exclaimed Clara, flinging upon Louisa a strange look of mingled incredulity and terror. " Our aunt restored to consciousness? Ah! Valentine," she observed, abruptly turning toward the baronet, " how can I ever look that beloved relative in the face and tell her everything that has happened? "

" Clara, Clara," almost shrieked forth Louisa, " what is it that you say? Recall those dreadful words which have struck terror to my heart. Oh, you cannot have done wrong. No, no, it is impossible."

At this instant the door of the parlour was thrown open, and Mrs. Owen, accompanied by Lilian, having darted downstairs on hearing that half-scream from Louisa's lips, rushed into the room.

" Heavens! Lady Sackville! " exclaimed Mrs. Owen, in a voice of thrilling surprise.

" Lady Sackville! " echoed Louisa, wildly. Then fixing her eyes for a moment upon her sister, she shrieked forth, " O God, I understand it all! " and sank down senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

Here we must interrupt the regular course of our narrative to chronicle certain events necessary to the elucidation of the mysteries belonging to the past.

Some four and twenty years previous to the period of which we have been writing, there was a family consisting of four sisters, named Halkin, residing at a short distance from the cathedral city of Rochester. Their Christian names were Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian. They had been left orphans at a somewhat early age, with a moderate income derived from an annuity purchased in the stock of some public company. Lydia, the eldest, was the only one of the four that had no claim to the possession of beauty, but in compensation for this absence of personal charms she possessed an amiable heart, an excellent disposition, and the purest principles of rectitude and virtue. Her three sisters, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian, were endowed with a rare loveliness, but, on the other hand, they were wanting in sound moral stamina. They had been well educated and genteelly brought up, and their accomplishments as well as their polished breeding qualified them all to move in the best society.

The extraordinary beauty of Anne, Melissa, and Lilian might also have justified them in the hope of forming good matrimonial alliances; but the giddy flirtations into which they were led with some young officers in garrison at Chatham (which town joins Rochester) materially damaged their character for prudence and propriety, and not only caused them to be spoken lightly of by many of their acquaintances, but also to be excluded from the parties given by those families whom they had been accustomed to visit. Lydia,

the eldest sister, beheld these results with anguish and foreboding, and earnestly remonstrated against the thoughtless course which Anne, Melissa, and even the young Lilian (then only fifteen) had pursued. But they treated her well-meant advice with the most unbecoming levity, and affected to regard the opinion of the world with extreme indifference.

The consequences were precisely those which might have been anticipated. The three giddy girls, more thoughtless than positively depraved, and not yet unchaste, were in their hearts sadly mortified at being actually cut by their former friends, and at finding that their respectability was gone. The transition from this state of feeling to that of recklessness was easy and rapid. Anne, the eldest of the three foolish young women, began to reason with herself that she was now past twenty, that all her prospects of forming a good marriage were blasted, and that any change in her condition could scarcely be of a very flattering nature. That is to say, she might become a tradesman's wife, or the mistress of a gentleman. The former proposal was submitted to her by a shopkeeper, who was too much enamoured of her beauty to think deeply of her damaged reputation, and the latter offer was made to her by a gentleman named Owen, who was staying in Rochester at the time, and was much smitten with her charms. Mr. Owen was not very well off, but he was remarkably handsome, and was related to the Leveson family; he was likewise most impassioned in his suit. Anne was glowing and voluptuous in temperament, and she accordingly fled from her home and accepted the protection of Mr. Owen.

This was a sad blow for the pure-minded and virtuous Lydia, but Melissa and Lilian openly declared that they thought their sister Anne had acted quite right. Lydia remonstrated with them, observing that with such ideas in their minds they themselves were preparing the way for their own ruin; and in her heart she deeply feared that Anne's example outweighed in its evil effects the good influences of her own advice and conduct. Soon after Anne's elopement with Mr. Owen, a young gentleman, passing by the name of Beckford, exceedingly handsome, and not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, came to pass a few weeks at Rochester. He lived in the most quiet manner, brought

no letters of introduction with him to any of the families in the city or neighbourhood, and did not appear to seek acquaintances. Yet he was evidently well off, for he was attended by his valet and groom, had a couple of horses, and passed the greater portion of his time in riding about the country.

During one of these equestrian jaunts he fell in with Melissa, as she was rambling out alone. We will not pause to say upon what pretext he addressed her. Suffice it to observe that, being smitten with her beauty, he did address her, and she displayed but little prudery on being accosted by so handsome a young man. Before he well knew who she was, or that she belonged to a family not overcelebrated for prudence or propriety, and one member of which had already eloped with a paramour, he fell so deeply in love with Melissa that he offered her marriage. This proposal she was by no means likely to reject, especially as she herself reciprocated that passion with an equal degree of fervour. They were accustomed to meet in the secluded walks and lanes in the vicinage of the cathedral city; and as Mr. Beckford (as he called himself) knew no one in those parts to tell him anything about the Halkin family, and, indeed, as he kept this little love-affair entirely to himself, he continued wooing, with every appearance of honourable intention, where in reality he might at first have achieved a conquest upon much easier terms.

We have said that Melissa soon learned to love him fondly, and this was the case. She adored him with all an impassioned woman's glowing affection, and she soon began to contemplate with pride and hopefulness the time when she was to become his wife. So vehement were his protestations of honourable intentions that in the midst of this glow of passion she still retained her chastity; and by thus repelling such advances as he made to possess her, she confirmed his belief that she was a young lady who must be wooed as a wife to be won at all. Thus went on this love-affair for some months, and at length Mr. Beckford told her that the reasons which had compelled him to remain in seclusion at Rochester had ceased to exist. Indeed, it was a chancery suit in which he had been engaged, which in its multifarious ramifications had threatened him with arrest for what is termed "contempt of court;" but the fault in the proceed-

ings having been amended, the suit terminated in his favour, putting him in possession of some property.

Such was the tale he told, and it was the true one. But he did not add, as he ought to have done, that the name of Beckford was a fictitious one, which he had temporarily assumed the better to avoid the inimical process of the chancery court.

He was now, then, about to leave Rochester, and he told some story as a reason for wishing that his marriage with Melissa should take place under circumstances of the strictest privacy. No matter now what the story might have been; it was one of those which false gallants under such circumstances have but little difficulty in devising, and so specious was it, that Melissa believed it. She communicated the circumstances to her sisters Lydia and Lilian. The former was at once suspicious, and recommended searching inquiries; the latter, naturally credulous to a degree, supported all Melissa's hopes and arguments that everything was straightforward. Even Lydia herself was somewhat if not entirely disarmed of her misgivings when Mr. Beckford was duly introduced at the house and proposed that the marriage should take place there, but under circumstances of great privacy. This was agreed to, Mr. Beckford undertaking to obtain the special license and bring the clergyman with him at the appointed hour. All these arrangements were duly carried out. Mr. Beckford came punctually to the moment with a post-chaise, and accompanied by the reverend gentleman who was to perform the ceremony. The special license was also produced, Lydia and Lilian acted as bridemaids, the rites were solemnized, and the happy Melissa was saluted by her sisters as Mrs. Beckford. She and her husband then entered the post-chaise and were whirled away to London.

On arriving in the metropolis, Melissa was introduced to a handsome house in a beautful suburban region, and there was she installed as its mistress. But in a few days Mr. Beckford urged the motives which he had before given on behalf of the private marriage as the reasons why he could not dwell altogether with her for the present. "He had a very particular and self-willed old father to conciliate, who would cut him off with a shilling if he knew of this marriage." Melissa, loving devotedly, and not wishing to see her husband frustrated in what he represented as his

" brilliant prospects," consented to all the arrangements he suggested; and he accordingly seldom spent the night at the house, although scarcely a day passed without his calling and staying several hours with her. Such was the influence he obtained over Melissa that he persuaded her to keep these circumstances secret from her sisters at Rochester when she wrote to them, and she did so. In due course the birth of a daughter, whom she christened Clara, gave her the occupations of a mother, and thus agreeably filled up the intervals when Mr. Beckford was absent.

Here we must interrupt that portion of the narrative which regards Melissa, in order to speak of Lilian. This beautiful but by no means steady-minded young creature remained with her sister Lydia at the dwelling near Rochester, and she also fell in with a handsome young gentleman who became enamoured of her charms. This admirer was named Bernard Audley. He was connected with the aristocracy, had been educated at Cambridge, and was shortly to be ordained for the Church. Lilian stood more than her other sisters had done in terror of Lydia, and Lydia herself, feeling a sort of maternal responsibility toward Lilian, who was the youngest, kept as jealous a watch as possible over the young damsel. Nevertheless, Lilian contrived to meet her lover in secret. He offered marriage, and she believed, but having less command over her passions than Melissa, she had not the moral strength to resist the overtures of Bernard Audley, and her virtue was accordingly surrendered to his keeping. He devised a well-concocted tale to account for his delay in making her his own, alleging that he was scarcely yet of age, entirely dependent upon his friends, and picturing nought but ruin for himself and utter poverty for both if he at present made Lilian his wife. The credulous girl believed implicitly all he told her, but when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she grew earnest in her entreaties that he would espouse her at any risk. Still he procrastinated the fulfilment of his solemn promise, and Lilian's situation grew day by day less tolerable and more desperate.

At length her sister Lydia began to suspect that something was wrong, though she was very far from conjecturing that matters were so bad as they really were. She had a serious conversation with Lilian, and the latter, in her utter despair, displayed a spirit which led to some little altercation.

To fly into a passion and assume a proud and independent bearing was the last resource of a young woman taken to task by an elder sister and dreading to be taxed with what was really the truth. It was not therefore the kind-hearted Lydia's fault that this quarrel took place. She said and did everything conciliatory, but though all the while displaying so rebellious a spirit, Lilian had not the real courage to throw herself into Lydia's arms and reveal the truth. At her next interview with Bernard Audley she gave way to her feelings to such an extent that he grew frightened, and when she besought him to take her away with him to some distant part, even if he could not make her his wife at the moment, he yielded to her demand. She fled with him, and Lydia, the eldest sister, was now left alone in her cheerless and forsaken abode. She would have followed Lilian, but could obtain no clue concerning her. She went to London and communicated the sad intelligence to Melissa, who was much affected. She likewise found out where her sister Anne was living with Mr. Owen, and to her also did she tell the tale. But Mrs. Owen (as she was styled) treated it with characteristic lightness, saying that she had no doubt Lilian had consulted her own happiness in the course she had adopted. Poor Lydia, well-nigh broken-hearted, returned to her forlorn dwelling near Rochester, to brood over her sorrows in secrecy and solitude.

Meanwhile Lilian had fled away with Bernard Audley. They were but mere girl and boy, neither of them being twenty-one at the time. The young man had a tolerable allowance from his parents, but he was naturally extravagant, as well as heartless and unprincipled, and his passion for Lilian soon cooling, he found her a burden. They travelled about from one fashionable watering-place to another, until the time arrived for Lilian to become a mother, and then she gave birth to a male child. Scarcely was she recovered from her confinement when her unscrupulous seducer proposed, without much circumlocution, that they should make away with their innocent offspring, as it was a sore burden upon them. She could scarcely believe her ears, and when he saw that she regarded him with indescribable horror, he affected to turn it off by declaring that he did but say so in jest and in order to try her.

Shortly afterward he abandoned her suddenly, leaving

her utterly penniless, and in debt at the lodging where they had been staying. Her anguish exceeded all powers of description, delirium fastened upon her brain, and in a paroxysm of frenzy, when utterly irresponsible for her actions, the unhappy creature but too faithfully followed out the accursed hint which she had received, and which was doubtless uppermost in her wildering thoughts at the time. She laid violent hands upon her child, and when the awful deed was done, her reason awoke to a full sense of its stupendous atrocity. She was arrested and conveyed to prison, but as she and Bernard Audley had been living under an assumed name, the statement, when first appearing in the newspapers, afforded her sisters no clue to the fact that she was the guilty infanticide, even if that statement met their eyes at all. When Lilian's trial, however, took place, her real name and that of her seducer transpired. She was acquitted of the charge, not precisely upon the ground of her delirious irresponsibility at the moment, but through some flaw in the indictment, and which was detected by the ingenuity of the counsel whom the sheriffs provided for her. She was accordingly set free without even a sentence of imprisonment, but still she went forth from her gaol with the brand of the murderess upon her brow.

When Lydia read in a newspaper the account of this trial, which account did happen to meet her eyes, she was at first overwhelmed with affliction; but summoning all her courage to her aid, she sped post-haste to the assize town where Lilian had gone through the fearful ordeal before the tribunal of justice. On arriving there, all she could learn was that the unhappy young woman, on being discharged, had instantaneously quitted the place, and no one knew what had become of her. Lydia accordingly returned to her cheerless home, now more cheerless than ever, because in her solitary hours she had the companionship of the most distracting thoughts. She likewise, poor creature, was destined to prove the truth of the old adage that misfortunes never come alone, for soon after the incident just related the public company whence her income was derived stopped payment, and speedily closed its transactions in bankruptcy, affording little better than a mere nominal dividend. Forthwith to Melissa (or Mrs. Beckford, as she was called) did Lydia hie to make known this fresh calamity, a calamity

which left her altogether denuded of resources. Melissa was, however, on the verge of confinement with her second child; and therefore Lydia, instead of obtruding her own sorrows upon her sister, remained to soothe and console her during the period of woman's painful ordeal. Another daughter was born, and was named Louisa.

But it was during the month following Melissa's accouchement that a fearful discovery was made, and most indiscreetly, as well as even abruptly, communicated to the invalid lady through the imprudence of the monthly nurse. This woman, who was intemperate in her habits, had nevertheless obtained considerable patronage amongst many of the ladies at the West End of London, and it so happened that she had attended on a certain Lady Malvern, the wife of Sir Archibald Malvern, a young baronet of considerable property but of somewhat dissipated character, who resided in Hanover Square. When Mr. Beckford called on Melissa, this monthly nurse at once recognized him as Sir Archibald Malvern. But he did not take any particular notice of her. His own son had been born about two years previous to the incident of which we are speaking. This interval had therefore elapsed since he had seen the nurse, and it was by no means probable that a gay, dashing, and thoughtless gentleman of the West End would recollect the countenance of an old woman. She, however, as just stated, knew him full well, and though she did not immediately betray the secret, nevertheless she retained it not thus sacred very long. Indeed, little more than a fortnight had elapsed since Melissa gave birth to Louisa when the old nurse, under the influence of spirituous liquor, let slip the fatal truth all in a moment, and Melissa, excited and agonized to a degree, at once saw in a hundred circumstances its dire confirmation.

Lydia was with her unhappy sister at the time and vainly endeavoured to soothe and console her. Shortly afterward the self-styled Mr. Beckford himself arrived at the house, and entering the room without previous announcement, according to his wont, was at once accused by the almost frantic Melissa of the treachery he had practised toward her. It was impossible to deny the charge, and his conduct, indeed, was all the less pardonable, inasmuch as, from what the nurse had stated, he must actually have been married at the time when the chancery suit had compelled him to

retire for a season to Rochester, and when he was therefore courting Melissa. Falling upon his knees, he confessed everything, passionately pleading the infatuation of his love as the only excuse he could offer for his treacherous conduct. His marriage, indeed, with Melissa had been a mere mockery, for though a special license was really obtained, as any one upon payment of certain fees can procure such a document, yet the individual who had acted as the clergyman on the occasion was an unprincipled, profligate fellow, a broken-down gentleman, in short, whom Sir Archibald Malvern had bribed to become an accomplice in the solemn but perfidious farce.

Such was the confession which the baronet made to the deceived Melissa, and in the hearing of the sorrowful but likewise indignant Lydia. To do him justice, he was overwhelmed with grief and stricken with remorse, for in truth he loved Melissa well, although in the selfishness and the heartlessness of that love he had made her his victim. He implored her forgiveness, vowing that he would ever continue his attentions toward herself, and a paternal care in respect to the children; and he besought that for his own sake and for that of his wife an exposure might be avoided. And Melissa did forgive him. Yes, so ardent and sincere was her love that she granted him her pardon. But in her weak and enfeebled condition at the time the blow was more than she could endure, and despite all the attentions of the eminent physicians whom Sir Archibald Malvern in his anguish and alarm summoned to attend upon her, she failed rapidly, and in a few days ceased to exist.

When the funeral was over, Lydia composed her half-distracted feelings as well as she was able, in order to have a serious conversation and come to a solemn understanding with Sir Archibald Malvern relative to a future provision for the motherless children whose care now devolved upon herself. The baronet at once desired her to specify the arrangements which she was anxious for him to make. Her future plans were already settled, and her notions in pecuniary matters were limited and economical. Nevertheless, her own sources of income having utterly failed through the bankruptcy of the public company, she found herself altogether dependent upon Sir Archibald Malvern. She therefore stipulated for an income of £120 a year, with

which she undertook to bring up the two children in a decent and respectable manner. To these terms Sir Archibald Malvern at once assented; but in order to guard against the possibility of the affair ever coming to the knowledge of his wife, he proposed that in drawing upon him periodically for the amounts due, it should be in the name of Beckford. To this Lydia could offer no possible objection, and the understanding was therefore finally settled between them.

Lydia then explained to the baronet the plan she had formed. She could not bear the idea of bringing up her nieces with the stigma of illegitimacy upon them, or that they should ever have to blush when in after years speaking of their parents. Moreover, as the family to which she belonged had in so many ways disgraced itself, and the name of Halkin was one which she could no longer bear in the world with pride and honour, though she herself had never tarnished it, yet she resolved to renounce it and take another. Besides, it was consistent with the notions she had formed relative to the bringing up of her two motherless nieces that they should never learn the profligacies of their two aunts, Anne and Lilian; and therefore it was desirable that the name of Halkin should at no time be identified with their growing impressions. It was for all these reasons that Lydia took the name of Stanley, broke up her home at Rochester, and removed with her two infant charges to the retired and secluded cottage at Canterbury. For the same reasons also was it that, as Clara and Louisa grew up, they were given to understand that their father was an officer in the army who had been killed in the Flemish wars, and that the shock produced by the sad intelligence had sent their mother to an early grave.

Before, however, Lydia Halkin quitted London, after Melissa's death, she found out her sister Anne, who was living with Mr. Owen, by whom she already had two children, Agatha and Emma, and to her did she communicate the lamentable tragedy relative to Melissa. Mrs. Owen was deeply affected at the intelligence, but Lydia, faithful to the plans which she had laid down, — and intent upon secluding herself henceforth entirely from the world, for the sake of the two children left solely dependent upon her, — gave Mrs. Owen not the least insight into her future

intentions nor made the slightest allusion to her intended change of name and removal to some other part of the country. Therefore, when all those arrangements were carried out, and Lydia with the pseudonym of Miss Stanley took up her abode at the retired cottage near Canterbury, in company with her two orphan nieces, Mrs. Owen altogether lost sight of her.

We should observe that to account for the girls bearing her own name, that of Stanley, their aunt represented herself, not as their deceased mother's, but as their father's sister. We may likewise remark that by dint of the utmost frugality she was enabled to give them as good an education as the best day-school for young ladies in Canterbury could afford; and as she herself was well versed in all branches of polite education and in many accomplishments, the instructions she was enabled to impart were immensely beneficial to her nieces. Nevertheless, as they grew up, Miss Stanley could not help occasionally noticing, with an inward misgiving and even presentiment, that Clara's disposition was not altogether so radically good as that of Louisa, but that the former was naturally of indolent habits, somewhat selfish and egotistical, with a tinge of duplicity; whereas Louisa's character was a compound of all the amenities, excellences, and amiabilities that can possibly combine to consolidate the principles of virtue and form a safeguard for woman's innocence and purity.

CHAPTER XIX

CONTINUATION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

Years elapsed, and, as the reader will remember, it was when Clara was nineteen and Louisa was seventeen that their aunt was stricken with paralysis, losing both speech and reason, and though living on, yet unconscious of all external objects and even of her own existence. Some months passed, and when the two sisters found their funds exhausted, Louisa called upon the Canterbury banker, and ascertained from him that Miss Stanley, the aunt, had been accustomed to draw half-yearly for sixty pounds upon a certain Mr. Beckford who resided in London. The banker, at Louisa's request, wrote a letter to Mr. Beckford, at No. 20, Hanover Square. During the long lapse of years which had intervened since Melissa's death, Sir Archibald Malvern had regularly received and honoured Miss Stanley's drafts. He had, however, bribed the postman never to deliver at his house any letters addressed to Mr. Beckford, but to leave them at a certain shop at the West End, where Sir Archibald dealt, and where he was wont to call at such times that the letters from Canterbury were likely to arrive. Upon receiving in this way the Canterbury banker's communication, he wrote, in the name of Beckford, to express his sorrow at Miss Stanley's illness and announce that thenceforth the joint draft of the two nieces would be duly honoured for the same half-yearly sum as heretofore. Lady Malvern was then still alive, and exceedingly jealous as well as suspicious; hence the maintenance of all these precautionary arrangements connected with the name of Beckford. Indeed, to guard the more completely against the discovery of his youthful amour and the treacheries that had characterized it, Sir Archibald was not wont to honour the drafts

through his own regular banker, but through the London agent of the Canterbury bank.

It was very shortly after he had written the letter just referred to, in reply to the Canterbury banker's communication, that Lady Malvern died, after a very brief illness; and although the same reasons now no longer existed for maintaining all the precautions so long persevered in, Sir Archibald nevertheless made no change in the plan of transmitting the money, simply because it was a convenient one and had grown habitual. Eighteen months more passed, and in the month of June, 1814, he himself met his death in the bathroom at the Blackheath villa, while engaged in his intrigue with Lady Ernestina Dysart. As a matter of course the next bill, sent by Clara and Louisa to London through the Canterbury bank, was returned unpaid, and the letters of advice addressed as usual to Mr. Beckford remained unnoticed. They lay at the tradesman's shop where the postman was wont to deliver them, and the tradesman himself, not dreaming of the horrible catastrophe in which Sir Archibald's life had closed, kept them, in the hope that he would call for them. The Canterbury banker wrote to his London agent to make inquiries, but the latter could learn nothing, and, by some oversight, neglected to inform his Canterbury correspondent of the fruitless result of his inquiries.

Then was it that, failing to obtain any satisfactory intelligence from London, the two young ladies held a long deliberation together, the result of which was Clara's memorable journey to the metropolis. On arriving in London, in the middle of July, 1814, Clara at once proceeded to No. 20, Hanover Square, and to her astonishment she learned that no such person as Mr. Beckford resided at the mansion, that he was not even known there, nor, indeed, did any person of that name dwell in the neighbourhood. Of course the name of Sir Archibald Malvern was altogether strange and unknown to Clara, and she was alike bewildered and dismayed. She asked to see Mr. Valentine, but from him she obtained no satisfactory information. Nevertheless, though so deeply absorbed in his own sorrows, arising from the then very recent and mysterious disappearance of Sir Archibald, he was inspired, not with a feeling of love and admiration for the beautiful girl, but with a sentiment of

profound compassion and sympathy on her behalf. It was as if the voice of nature was whispering in some faintly heard and unknown language in his soul, as accident thus threw him in contact with his half-sister.

From Hanover Square Clara Stanley proceeded to the London banker, but there her inquiries were equally futile. She issued from the bank in utter despair. Poverty stared her in the face, — not mere poverty in the mitigated acceptance of the term, but utter destitution and gaunt beggary. Nor did she dread these hideous evils for herself alone, but on account of her loved sister Louisa and her poor, helpless, bedridden aunt. For whatever faults Clara might have possessed, — and these were as yet scarcely developed, — she was endowed with a generous heart; and all the images of horror which in her deep desperation were forced upon her mind would have led her at once to make any sacrifice in order to avert the threatened ruin from herself and those she loved. Returning to Gracechurch Street to take her place by the coach for Canterbury, she was robbed in the neighbourhood of the booking-office. Her little all was now gone. Penniless in the streets of London, she had not even the means of paying the necessary deposit to secure a seat in the coach. Driven almost to madness, she hastened in pursuit of the individual whom she supposed to have robbed her. Vain attempt! and she soon became aware of the entire hopelessness of her endeavour to catch the pickpocket in the maze of the metropolis.

Pausing in the profoundest despondency to reflect upon what course she should pursue, Clara Stanley was accosted by an elderly woman whose respectable appearance and motherly demeanour at once gained her confidence. The female questioned her relative to the mournfulness of her looks, and Clara, in her inexperience of London life, was naturally overjoyed to find herself the object of so much apparent sympathy. She therefore unhesitatingly revealed the causes of her embarrassment, and the woman, struck by her exceeding beauty as well as by her unquestionable innocence, corroborated as it was by the artlessness of her tale, offered to befriend her. Clara, full of hope and fervent gratitude, accompanied the matron-looking female, and a hackney-coach being summoned, she was taken by her new friend to a handsome establishment in a large square.

Thus was it that Clara Stanley unconsciously fell into the hands of one of the vilest women in existence, for this human personification of hypocrisy was none other than Mrs. Gale, and it was to her house of fashionable resort that the innocent young lady was introduced.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Gale did not at once shock Clara's delicacy or awaken her suspicions by throwing her in contact with any frail creature who might at the moment have been in the house; but, installing her in a room to herself, she at once hastened away to Albemarle Street for the purpose of driving a bargain with the Marquis of Leveson for the sale of Clara's virtue. She failed, however, to see the marquis on the occasion, and was returning to Soho Square when she bethought herself of a certain commission which she had received some time previously from a lady of fashion at the West End and with whom she was acquainted. She accordingly, without a moment's delay, proceeded to call upon Miss Bathurst, at No. 13, Stratton Street, Piccadilly, for this was the lady alluded to. Miss Bathurst was at home, and at once gave an audience to Mrs. Gale.

"I have at length found," said the infamous woman, when closeted with Miss Bathurst, "a young lady who, if I mistake not, will exactly suit your requirements, whatever they may be. Into the nature thereof I do not pretend to inquire; but the beautiful creature whom accident has thrown in my way will be worth at least a couple of hundred guineas to me from the Marquis of Leveson or some other fashionable patron, and if you like to give me that sum this phœnix of perfection shall be placed in your hands for you to model her to suit your own purposes. She exactly answers all the points in the description you gave of what you wanted when you first entrusted me with the commission to obtain such a person. That she is innocence itself and of unblemished chastity, there can be no doubt. When you hear her artless tale from her own lips, as I have heard it, you will be of the same opinion.

"As for her beauty, I do not exaggerate when I pronounce it to be not only of the highest order, but likewise of the most voluptuous style, combined with a sufficient degree of intellectuality to redeem it from mere brute sensuousness. She has not a single fault. Tall in stature, inclined to be stout, and with a magnificent development of the bust, her

figure is yet characterized by elegance and grace. She says that she is only twenty-one, and she may be believed, but she looks two or three years older. Her teeth and eyes are incomparable; her complexion is of dazzling whiteness, but with a rich bloom upon the cheeks. The auburn of her hair is the richest that ever I beheld, and the outline of her features is classic. Her manners, though tinged with rustic bashfulness, are nevertheless ladylike and prepossessing, and require but the smallest amount of proper tutoring to render them elegant. Altogether she answers the description you gave me some time ago."

Miss Bathurst was overjoyed, and immediately concluded a bargain with Mrs. Gale, who hastened back to Soho Square, and with some ready excuse for the proceeding, took Clara Stanley at once to Stratton Street; so that the young lady issued from the vile woman's house not only as pure as she had entered it, but likewise without entertaining the remotest suspicion of the den of infamy where she had thus passed two hours on this memorable day.

It was still early in the afternoon when Clara was thus introduced to Miss Bathurst, and Mrs. Gale was at once dismissed with the stipulated sum in her pocket. Miss Bathurst has already been described to the reader as a lady midway between forty and fifty, retaining the traces of great beauty; and as her manners were elegant, her address fascinating, and her hypocrisy consummate, she was at once enabled to make a very favourable impression upon Clara. The young lady repeated to her new friend all that she had previously told Mrs. Gale, and in a short half-hour Miss Bathurst was fully acquainted with every point and particular of Clara's history so far as the fair narratrix was herself acquainted with it.

"Now," said Miss Bathurst, "you are a young lady of intelligence and of a strong mind, and you are for the instant in a most embarrassing position. It happens that I have it in my power — at least, I hope so — to place you in a career of brilliancy and splendour. So far from dreading poverty, you shall be surrounded with riches. So far from fearing that the sister and the aunt whom you love may become houseless and friendless, you shall have it in your power to maintain them in comfort and ease. Innocent though you are, you cannot be unconscious of the circum-

stance that you possess a loveliness of no common order, and that, so far from having been formed to dwell in the seclusion of a country cottage, you were destined to shine as a star in the brilliant circles of fashion. Will you leave yourself in my hands? Will you permit me to become your preceptress? The career which I purpose to open before you may lead to the most enviable position, — perhaps enable you to form some splendid matrimonial alliance."

Clara was bewildered by all that she heard, and her brain was half-intoxicated by this sudden elevation from the depths of despondency to the pinnacle of hope. But she craved further explanations. Miss Bathurst at once replied that she could not develop her projects all in a moment, that Clara must abandon herself to them in all confidence, and even give proofs not merely by that confidence, but also by her qualifications, that she was worthy of being entrusted with the important secret of her new friend's designs. Having thus spoken, Miss Bathurst, artfully availing herself of Clara's desperate position, put it to her to decide at once. " There was no time for delay. She might refuse or accept, as she chose. If she refused she must at once take her departure from the house, but when she found herself friendless and penniless in the wide streets of London, what would she do? Would she not be glad to come back and accept even a far less brilliant destiny and upon much harder conditions? "

Clara grew more and more bewildered. Miss Bathurst, following up her advantage, plied every argument, delineated every golden prospect, and used all her powers of persuasion as far as she was able.

" Do not think," she said, " that I am a mere paltry intriguante or a base trafficker in female virtue. Little as you know of London, you must perceive that this is a fashionable street, and a glance around will show you that this is a fine house, of undoubted respectability. Here is the Court Guide; you perceive my name in it. Behold these cards upon the table: they are those of my visitors, and you observe amongst them some of the highest names, male and female, in the British aristocracy. Here," continued Miss Bathurst, opening her writing-desk and placing several perfumed billets in Clara's hands, " are notes of invitation

to the noblest as well as the most fashionable houses. Here is even a note from the prince regent, written by his own hand, and accompanying that beautiful vase you see upon the chiffoniere and which he sent me as a present. You observe that he writes to me as 'Dear Miss Bathurst,' a distinguished honour only conferred on the favourites of that select circle which visits at Carlton House. Here is another note from his Royal Highness to my nephew, Mr. Horace Sackville, inviting him to dinner at the palace. See, the prince addresses him 'Dear Horace,' and concludes with 'Your affectionate friend.' But I need give you no further proofs of my own high position. It is now for you to judge whether you will put implicit faith in me. In this case you must make up your mind to remain in London; you cannot return home. An excuse for your absence can easily be made to your sister Louisa, and your aunt is placed, by her affliction, beyond all possibility of inquiring after you. Moreover, your letter to Louisa can enclose this bank-note for a hundred pounds, which will serve to corroborate whatever tale we may devise to account for your stay in London."

Clara hesitated no longer. Was it likely that she would do so? Bewildered by all she heard and all she saw, convinced by the many proofs placed before her of Miss Bathurst's social position and high standing in society, and also perceiving the real, tangible means of shielding her beloved sister and afflicted aunt from the menaces of poverty, the young lady blindly abandoned herself to her new friend's care, counsels, and tutorings, and at once signified her assent. It was yet time to save that day's post, and it was most necessary to do so, inasmuch as Louisa would be anxiously looking out on the following morning for a letter. Accordingly, Miss Bathurst's ingenuity at once suggested that Clara Stanley should pretend to have found the Mr. Beckford whom she had come up to London to seek, and that this person, whether real or imaginary, should, at all events, be made the alleged source of that bounty which the letter was to contain and likewise the cause of Clara's detention in the metropolis.

The young lady accordingly wrote to Miss Bathurst's dictation, her own ideas being very far from sufficiently collected to enable her to undertake the spontaneous authorship of such a letter. The reader will recollect that this

letter was given in full in one of the earliest chapters of our tale. The summary of its contents was to the effect that Clara had found Mr. Beckford, who was a kind-hearted, amiable, and excellent old gentleman, that it was entirely through a mistake, which he had explained, that the last cheque upon him was not honoured, that he had desired a bank-note for a hundred pounds to be at once forwarded to Canterbury, that Mrs. Beckford had insisted upon keeping Clara in London for a few weeks, and that the Beckfords had removed their residence from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street, to which latter direction Louisa must send her reply.

Such was the letter that Clara penned according to Miss Bathurst's dictation, and when it was sent off to the post and beyond recall, the young lady felt she had taken her first lesson in the school of duplicity. She therefore found it impossible to retreat, even if she were inclined. But she was not, for this new existence upon which she had entered speedily developed numerous and increasing charms for a young woman of Clara's disposition. The very next morning Miss Bathurst took her in a carriage to see Acacia Cottage at Knightsbridge, and as Clara was much pleased with the dwelling itself and its beautiful situation, the carriage whirled away at once to the house agent who had the letting of it. But while proceeding thither, Miss Bathurst said, "That beautiful cottage is to become your home so soon as it can be got ready. You must abandon your present name and take a new one, so as to destroy all identity between the future tenant of that house and the humble Clara Stanley from a secluded habitation in some corner of Kent. You must take a name at once aristocratic and fascinating. Let me think. When the tutorings to which you are to be subjected shall have given the requisite polished gloss to your manners, you will know how to mingle dignity with elegance, and your beauty will be at once splendid, queenly, and dazzling. And at this moment all that I have just said reminds me of a description I was reading this morning of the proud beauty of Venice, the Queen of the Adriatic. Now, then, the idea is excellent. Your Christian name shall be Venetia. It is an uncommon name, and at once gives the idea of a charming, elegant, and graceful woman. Well, then, you are

Venetia instead of Clara. But now for a surname. What think you of Montgomery? No, that is too long. Plantagenet? No, that would really appear to be assumed. Trelawney? Yes, an excellent name, Venetia Trelawney! Now, my dear friend, I have the infinite pleasure of shaking hands with the elegant Miss Venetia Trelawney."

Thus speaking, Miss Bathurst suited the action to the word and took the hand of the astonished and bewildered Clara Stanley, who, as a matter of course, had no objection to offer to the proposed substitution of nomenclature, seeing, as she did, that it formed a part of Miss Bathurst's still mysterious and unfathomable project. By the time this arrangement was made, and Clara Stanley had become in a few minutes transformed into Venetia Trelawney, the carriage stopped at the house agent's. There a bargain was at once made. Miss Bathurst haggled not at terms, but paid the requisite premium for the lease, which she ordered to be made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney, so that our heroine all in a moment found herself the lessee of Acacia Cottage. Then the carriage whirled away once more, and this time it was to an upholsterer's. The immense warehouses of splendid furniture were inspected by the two ladies, and Miss Bathurst was delighted to find that her young companion developed much excellent taste, notwithstanding the secluded life she had led, in expressing her opinion relative to the mode of furnishing the several rooms at Acacia Cottage. The upholsterer received orders to have the cottage furnished throughout within twenty-four hours. Five hundred pounds were paid in advance, with the intimation that the balance should be forthcoming on the completion of the order, and the receipt was made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney.

From the upholsterer's the carriage proceeded to a silversmith's hard by, and there a select quantity of plate was chosen, Miss Bathurst still consulting Venetia Trelawney's taste, and finding it to be really excellent. The bill was paid, the receipt being, as on the former occasion, made out in the name of Miss Trelawney, and the goods were ordered to be sent on the morrow to Acacia Cottage. From the silversmith's Miss Bathurst and Venetia proceeded to a fashionable jeweller's in Bond Street, and there our heroine was presented with a beautiful watch and chain, some rings,

a set of pearls, and various other articles, amounting altogether to more than a hundred guineas, for which Miss Bathurst's apparently inexhaustible purse furnished the amount, and again was the receipt made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. From the jeweller's the carriage proceeded to Miss Bathurst's attorney, she having, as she alleged, a few instructions to give that gentleman; but during her interview with him Venetia was left in the carriage, and therefore she knew not what the nature of the business was. Nor, indeed, did she devote a thought to the circumstance, for the strange rapidity of the incidents through which she was being whirled, as in a dream of fairyland, kept her brain in a state of pleasurable excitement and blissful bewilderment.

From the lawyer's the carriage proceeded to a fashionable mercer's, and there large purchases were made. Morning and evening dresses, dresses likewise for walking and for the carriage, and every requisite of a fashionable lady's toilet, were chosen in no niggard manner and paid for without hesitation, the receipt being still made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. Thence away to Long Acre, where dwelt an eminent carriage-builder, and here a beautiful barouche in the newest fashion, and of the lightest and most elegant style, was purchased. But as Miss Bathurst was no judge of horses, but could put the utmost confidence in the carriage-builder, who had received her patronage for years, he was empowered to procure a pair with the least possible delay, so that the equipage might be sent complete to Acacia Cottage in forty-eight hours. The acknowledgment for the amount paid on this occasion was, as heretofore, made out to the credit of Miss Trelawney.

The greater portion of the day was thus occupied, and when Miss Bathurst and Venetia returned to Stratton Street it was time to think of dinner. Our heroine was now introduced to two ladies who had come to stay with Miss Bathurst. One was Mrs. Arbuthnot, whom Miss Bathurst introduced to Venetia as her future companion, inasmuch as it would be imprudent and might provoke the tongue of scandal were she to dwell alone at her future residence of Acacia Cottage. The other lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert, formerly the mistress of the prince regent, but who had for many years altogether ceased even from seeing him. She

was upwards of sixty, but still retained the traces of an extraordinary beauty, and preserved a fine embonpoint, into which the once voluptuous grandeur of her charms had expanded. Venetia did not then know that Mrs. Fitzherbert had been so intimately connected with the prince, for she was utterly unversed in all the rumours and scandals of court life. But Mrs. Fitzherbert treated Venetia with a kind of affectionate attention, and also surveyed her with the deepest interest; and when dinner was over she and Miss Bathurst placed Venetia between them on the sofa, and not merely began to give her what might be termed lectures upon the manners of high life and the etiquette of the best society, but also, gently and delicately, as well as with much apparent kindness, mentioned to her any little faults they had noticed in her deportment at the dinner-table. These were very few indeed, and were rather little awkwardnesses than positive solecisms in good breeding, and Venetia, who possessed a rare appreciation as well as an extraordinary intuitive quickness on such points, at once profited by the hints and suggestions thrown out. Thus the evening passed away, and our heroine retired to her chamber well wearied with the bustle and excitement of the day. Scarcely, therefore, was her head laid upon the pillow, when she fell asleep, and thus had no time for thought.

The whole of the next day was passed indoors. Milliners and dressmakers were in attendance, and to these auxiliaries of the toilet did she have to devote some time. About noon Miss Bathurst's lawyer was announced, and that lady, taking Venetia aside, addressed her in the following manner:

"My dear girl, you saw yesterday the immense outlay which I made on your account, and which, when the rest of the bills are paid, will have absorbed more than two thousand guineas. Now, I mean to be very frank with you. You suddenly find yourself a comparatively rich woman, for you have a splendidly furnished house, a beautiful equipage, plate, jewelry, a varied and costly wardrobe, and everything necessary to commence housekeeping in the handsomest style. But this is not all. Here is a banker's book, and you will find, if you open it, that a thousand guineas have been paid in to your account. All this shows you that nothing has been done by halves, and at the same time you can form an idea of the enormous amount expended in setting

afoot my plan. Well as I think of you, my dear Venetia, yet you must nevertheless remember you are a total stranger to me, and I am about to place unlimited confidence in you. At starting, therefore, I make it a purely business matter, and my lawyer has prepared a bond, which you will sign, and which makes you my debtor to the extent of three thousand guineas. Of course I shall never expect payment direct from you, but this bond will enable me to reënter into possession of all the property wherewith I am entrusting you if at any time you should endeavour to deceive me. It is a mere precaution, and as you doubtless mean fair play, there can be no harm in your signing it. My lawyer is waiting in another room, and when you have gone through this little formality, I will give you full and complete explanations of the whole project which I have in hand, and for the carrying out of which your assistance is engaged."

Venetia made no objection, and accompanying Miss Bathurst to the dining-room where the attorney was seated, she signed the bond. The lawyer took his leave, and when he was gone, Miss Bathurst proceeded to address Venetia in the following manner:

" Start not, my dear Venetia, when I inform you that some years ago I was upon terms of the closest intimacy with the prince regent. In fact, I was his mistress. But our connection came to an end, and with it ceased all the influence which for the time it gave me. Mrs. Fitzherbert was likewise for some years on the same footing with his Royal Highness. No, not exactly on the same footing, for whereas I was only secretly and privately his mistress, she was openly and publicly acknowledged as such. Her influence during the period of her connection with his Royal Highness was far greater than mine, and the loss of it, when that connection ceased, has even been more profoundly felt by that lady. A complete rupture has for the last twenty years existed between herself and the prince, but as you have seen by the letters from his Royal Highness which I have shown you, he still now and then deigns to think of me. Were I to ask a favour of him, however, I should experience a refusal, or else a cold neglect which I do not choose to draw down upon myself.

" Now, you must know that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself have reason to regret our total loss of influence at

court, for we have numerous relations and friends for whom we wish to provide in the various departments of the civil and military services. For a long time past we have taken counsel together, in order to devise some scheme to regain, though indirectly and through the medium of another, at least some portion of our lost interest with the prince regent. After varied deliberations we resolved upon a certain scheme, all the points and bearings of which we duly discussed, so as to mature our plan and render it ripe for execution whenever we should find the fitting agent for carrying it out. I accordingly gave instructions to a certain Mrs. Gale, a shrewd, deep-seeing, and active woman, to procure for me a young lady of matchless beatuy, elegant manners, fashionable appearance, and strong mind. It was no ordinary being that was thus sought after. There are plenty of beauties about the court already, and therefore for our purpose it needed one whose loveliness should transcend anything which ever came within the sphere of the prince's view. Months have passed since I gave that delicate but important commission to Mrs. Gale, but at length she has succeeded in the discovery of the perfect creature so necessary to the success of these plans. Mrs. Gale is the woman whom you encountered the day before yesterday in Gracechurch Street, and you are this phœnix of perfection."

Here Miss Bathurst paused for a few moments, while the colour gradually mantled upon Venetia's countenance, for the young lady now began to comprehend her destiny. As a matter of course, her mind was not sufficiently depraved to receive these explanations, so significant in their tendency, without a partial shock, but this effect of her better feelings was speedily triumphed over and subdued by the sense of gratified vanity, as well as by the certainty of present riches and splendour, and with the prospect of ascending to the most brilliant position. Miss Bathurst, who watched her with the keen, searching eye of a thorough woman of the world, read what was passing in her soul, and speedily saw that Venetia was her own.

"To-morrow," she continued, "you will go and take up your residence at Acacia Cottage, and in a very few days the whole West End of London will be ringing with the intelligence of a most lovely but mysterious star suddenly appearing in the galaxy of London life. The very mystery

which will hang around you cannot fail to give an enormous impulse to the excitement and the sensation you are to create. No one will know who you are or whence you come. There will be no clue to your parentage, your connections, or your friends. People will hear that you have honourably paid for everything in fitting up your establishment, and that you are well off. They will therefore see that you are no mere adventuress. Mrs. Arbuthnot, a prudent, far-sighted, and matronly-looking woman, will be your companion, living with you altogether, riding out with you in your carriage, and accompanying you in your walks, and therefore the breath of scandal cannot injure your fair fame.

"Thus far all circumstances will be propitious to you at the outset, and from that starting-point everything will depend upon yourself. You will have the dissipated members of the nobility seeking your acquaintance, but you must repulse them all. Hauteur to one, coldness to another, mocking disdain to a third, indignation to a fourth, and so on. Away with them all! Then you will receive tender billets beseeching interviews, making overtures of love, some in their infatuation proposing marriage, others offering to settle large sums upon you as an inducement to become their mistress. But every letter must either be returned to its writer, or else treated with stern silence. By these means you will obtain a reputation for a virtue as inaccessible as your charms are brilliant. In a few weeks the whole West End will be talking of you. But in the meantime you will have much to do. For a month to come you must every day practise music and drawing. You already possess a good elementary knowledge of these arts. Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is proficient in both, will speedily render you proficient also, for you must become eminently accomplished, as well as having the recommendations of personal loveliness and the strictest chastity. Then, too, you must read all the fashionable literature of the day. A large assortment of books necessary for these polite studies will presently go down to Acacia Cottage. Fashionable novels must form the principal portion of your reading, so that you may speedily catch an idea of the frivolities and the thousand and one elegant nothings which may be that to make up the sum of a fashionable existence. In these readings you will be assisted by Mrs. Arbuthnot, and you must never hesitate

to ask her for explanations when you find yourself at fault. You must likewise read Peerages and accounts of the aristocracy, as well as the fashionable newspapers and the court journals, so that you may obtain an insight into the histories and the proceedings of all the first families, for you know not how largely such matters enter into the conversation of high life. You possess an excellent memory, and whatever you study you will retain. You have also a quick intellect, and will speedily appreciate all the salient points in these subjects for your study. With your quickness and natural shrewdness, with your powerful mind and expansive genius, you will in a very few weeks complete what may be termed your fashionable education.

"But still this is not all. You must study before your mirror, as well as in books and journals. You must practise the airs, the looks, and the demeanours which are to be adopted to suit all occasions and likewise all emergencies. You must tutor that beautiful face of yours to seem disdainful at one moment, and softly winning at another; you must make those lovely eyes of yours flash fire at will, or droop into an expression of languor more softly sensuous than is even their natural wont; and you must apply the same plastic art to your coral lips, so that they may wreathe in smiles, curl with scorn, or be compressed with an air of subdued indignation. You must likewise study your attitudes, and practise movements and gestures; and in all this, do not forget that a large portion of your self-teachings is in preparation for the time when you will have to play the artillery of your charms upon that heart against which they are ultimately to be directed. Mrs. Arbuthnot will tell you how the whitest and most beautifully rounded arm may be set off to the best advantage by a particular gesture or attitude; how the finest, the whitest, and the most voluptuous bosom may be likewise displayed by a particular position; or how the daintiest feet and ankles can be shown by particular movements, the possessor all the time appearing unconscious of the circumstance. I do but glance hurriedly over these details. Mrs. Arbuthnot will go further into them with you, and in her will you find a proficient as well as willing and patient instructress."

Again Miss Bathurst paused, but rather to gather breath than to ascertain how Venetia received all she said; for the

satisfaction of the young lady was depicted in her countenance, Venetia being well pleased with the part which she had thus to play and the routine chalked out for her to pursue.

"As a matter of course," resumed Miss Bathurst, "you will form no friendships and receive no guests without previously consulting me; but as it will be better that your acquaintance with me should be kept as secret as possible, you must come but seldom to Stratton Street, and then only of an evening, as Mrs. Arbuthnot can be the means of constant communication between us. And now let me continue my explanations relative to the hoped-for results of all these preliminary arrangements. I have already said that you will soon become the topic of universal conversation throughout the fashionable world, and in proportion to your coldness and reserve toward all who seek your acquaintance, will grow the general anxiety to form it. The name of Venetia Trelawney will be in the mouth of every one, and when you ride in the park you will be the cynosure of general observation. The greatest ladies in the land will be mad with jealousy, because they will hear their husbands, lovers, and acquaintances all talking and thinking of nothing but Venetia Trelawney. You will become a favourite toast at dinner-parties and at the clubs, the fashionable newspapers will have paragraphs concerning you, your dress will give hints for the fashions, milliners and dressmakers will quote your good taste, and thus will the name of Venetia Trelawney become a perfect *furor* and rage.

"In due course, the prince regent will hear of you. My nephew, Horace Sackville, who is intimate at the palace, will not fail to drop hints and allusions to pique the prince's curiosity. You shall be introduced to Horace in a day or two; but he will not, when conversing with the prince or elsewhere concerning you, let it be known that he has the honour of your acquaintance. And, by the bye, talking of Horace I shall not mention to him how I became acquainted with you," added Miss Bathurst, for she did not wish her nephew to know that she had any knowledge of such a character as Mrs. Gale. "Nor, indeed," she continued, "must Horace visit you at Acacia Cottage. Nothing, in short, must be done in the shape of imprudence or indiscretion in any way calculated to betray the fact that I am at

the bottom of all this. For if the real truth were to transpire, the prince, who is uncommonly keen, would at once see through the whole design, and our purpose would be defeated. Well, my dear Venetia, you must now fully understand what I mean," added Miss Bathurst, " or, if you wish, I will be explicit to the end. And perhaps this course is the best. In plain terms, then, you are destined to become the mistress of the prince regent."

The deepest crimson now mantled upon Venetia's cheeks, but delight also beamed in her looks, joy dancing exultant in her sunny eyes, and her bosom heaving with a long sigh of pleasure. If the still small voice of conscience, whispering for a moment, touched a chord which vibrated to her heart and sent up that carnation glow to her cheeks, this voice was nevertheless almost instantaneously hushed by the louder tones in which ambition spoke in that same heart, and the thrilling pæans of triumph which resounded through her soul.

" Yes, you are destined to become the mistress of the prince regent," proceeded Miss Bathurst, " and no matter what remonstrance rigid virtue may offer or cold prudery may suggest, it is a brilliant and an enviable position. I say enviable, for there is not a titled beauty in the sphere of aristocracy that will not be madly jealous of you, and to be jealous, is to envy. You will be courted and fawned upon even by those who will hate you most, and of the male sex you will become the idol, the goddess, the divinity. Now, mark me well. If, with all the opportunities thus afforded, you play your cards judiciously and with tact, you cannot fail of success. When the curiosity of the prince is sufficiently piqued concerning you, he will devise some means to seek your acquaintance. Perhaps he will call upon you, without any formal introduction at all. So much the better; you will then have him in your power, and may stipulate your own conditions. If he falls madly in love, as he assuredly will, you can obtain anything at his hands, even to becoming a peeress in your own right. But we will not waste time in all these conjectures; the main point is for you to follow the career in which you will be placed and the advice which will be given you, and it is inevitable that the whole plot will succeed. It must succeed. But mind, one false step will ruin everything, one single act of imprudence will mar

all. It is only by achieving the extraordinary popularity I have described that you will be talked of in the prince's hearing, and then will Horace be enabled to serve us by still further piquing his curiosity. But if you yield to the overtures of any other individual, if you suffer yourself to be dazzled by any offers that may be made to you, if, in a word, you compromise your reputation and thus gain the character of an adventuress or an intriguante, you will fail to inspire that curiosity and sustain that prolonged excitement and sensation which can alone lead to success.

" And if successful, Venetia, only think of the advantages to be gained! They are incalculable. Your own position will of course be brilliant, and then must you labour on behalf of those who will have been instrumental in raising you to this summit of grandeur. For remember, it is I and Mrs. Fitzherbert who together have advanced these large sums of money to carry out our design; it is we who have rescued you from poverty and destitution, your sister and your aunt also, and are now placing you on the highroad to fortune, rank, and influence. Therefore, when that position shall have been secured to yourself, you must exert your power with the prince to provide pensions and places for those whom I and Mrs. Fitzherbert may point out, and through you shall we thus regain some portion of our departed influence. Now, Venetia, my explanations are complete. I do not ask you whether you have the capacity and the qualifications to enter upon a career where tact, judgment, delicacy, and shrewdness are as necessary as personal beauty itself, because in these respects I already know you to be well fitted for the purpose. But I do ask you whether, after all you have heard, you can enter, heart and soul, upon the enterprise and give yourself up to it with enthusiasm and devotion? "

With but little compunction, and with a pleasurable sensation infinitely outweighing it, Venetia replied in the affirmative, and her destiny was thus fixed.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST

Behold Venetia now installed at Acacia Cottage, and entering upon the routine which Miss Bathurst had chalked out and the pursuits which she had so elaborately detailed. Mrs. Arbuthnot became ostensibly her companion, but she in reality served also as Miss Bathurst's spy, so as to watch all Venetia's actions and make her report accordingly in Stratton Street. But our heroine proved too faithful to the cause in which she had embarked, and to the important interests stalked upon the enterprise, to commit any error or be led into any fault that needed reporting. Indeed, she proved an apt and docile pupil, not merely because she would not risk the agreeable position in which she was placed, but likewise because she had now her own ambition to gratify.

An experienced, wily, and astute lady's-maid, in the person of Miss Jessica, had been found for Venetia, and as this abigail was thoroughly trustworthy and unsurpassingly discreet, she was well fitted for the service she had to perform. The man servant chosen for Venetia's household was severe and morose enough to daunt any impertinent questioner, and at the same time old and ugly enough to avert the possibility of scandal on his account; for inasmuch as ladies of rank, fashion, and beauty full often convert their handsome footmen into lovers, a similar imputation might have been raised against Venetia had her male dependent been young, of good figure, and of prepossessing countenance. Every arrangement was thus made and every precaution taken by Miss Bathurst not only to retain a complete hold upon Venetia, but likewise to guard her reputation against the chance of calumny.

Our heroine's studies progressed most rapidly. All her habitual indolence seemed shaken off, and Mrs. Arbuthnot found her most assiduous as well as most intelligent in the various branches which she had been enjoined to cultivate. For Venetia, as above stated, not only had her ambition to gratify, but also to expel disagreeable thoughts; and hence her unwearied application to her music, her drawing, the books that had been provided for her, and her studies in all the fashionable refinements of demeanour, attitude, and manner. We have already described her as possessing a vigorous intellect and the keenest appreciation of all that was necessary for her to learn in order to play with proficiency the grand part entrusted to her; and it can therefore be no matter of surprise if in the comparatively short space of a couple of months she should have undergone the completest transformation from the inexperienced Clara Stanley of a humble dwelling at Canterbury into the brilliant Venetia Trelawney of Acacia Cottage.

When occasionally visiting Miss Bathurst of an evening, Venetia met Horace Sackville. And here we may as well observe that this young man was the illegitimate son of Miss Bathurst, but the prince regent was not his father. Indeed, this fact his Royal Highness knew full well, for it is to be hoped, for the honour of humanity, that if it had been otherwise, that is to say, if Horace were really the prince's son, the prince never would have intrigued with his own son's wife. Horace's father was another person with whom Miss Bathurst had been intimate in her time, but the young man himself had never been suffered to learn the exact particulars of his birth. He had been all along taught to believe that he was an orphan, indebted to the bounty of his aunt, Miss Bathurst, and as he grew up he had not chosen to ask many questions upon the subject. The liking that the prince took to him was merely one of the royal whims and caprices, and as Horace had many natural good qualities, and never took an improper advantage of the prince's favour, he did not forfeit it. From all that has transpired throughout our long tale relative to the character of Horace Sackville, it will be seen that he was endowed with all the necessary qualifications to render him an amiable, worthy, and even high-minded young man, had not his good principles been warped and the best feelings of his nature

spoiled by the contaminating dissipations and profligacies of the sphere into which he was thrown.

From the very first moment that Horace Sackville beheld Venetia, he was struck with her transcending loveliness, and, indeed, he at once conceived a profound attachment toward her. This he however veiled to the utmost of his power, because Miss Bathurst had duly initiated him in the purpose for which Venetia was destined, although the little circumstance relative to Mrs. Gale was carefully kept out of sight. Horace was too much accustomed to follow the instructions and obey the wishes of his aunt, as he called her, not to enter at once into the plans which she and Mrs. Fitzherbert had so artfully devised, but he could not prevent himself from loving Venetia secretly and tenderly, and the more he saw of her the deeper grew his affection. Still, he continued to keep this passion to himself, and, faithful to the positive instructions he received from Miss Bathurst, he forbore from calling at Acacia Cottage, or even hinting to any of his friends that he had the honour of Miss Trelawney's acquaintance.

Everything that Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert had foreseen, in arranging their plans, actually took place. Venetia Trelawney soon excited an immense sensation at the West End. All the noble roués and fashionable rakes were soon busied in making inquiries concerning her, and endeavouring to obtain an introduction. But all they could learn was that she had suddenly taken Acacia Cottage, fitted it up splendidly, and paid honourably as well as liberally for everything. Of course Miss Bathurst had enjoined her upholsterer, jeweller, carriage-builder, and other tradesmen to maintain the strictest secrecy relative to her acquaintance with Miss Trelawney, under the penalty of losing the said Miss Trelawney's future custom, and these injunctions were very faithfully adhered to.

Thus nothing could be learned relative to Venetia's antecedents; no one knew who she was, or whence she came, yet no one dared to assert that she was an adventuress or an intriguante. If this suspicion arose for a moment, it was very soon set at rest by her own conduct. Never did she appear in public without her duenna-like companion, Mrs. Arbuthnot; it was found impossible to obtain access to her, and the numerous billets which she received were either re-

turned in blank envelopes, or else treated with cold silence. So infatuated became many very wealthy but very silly personages that they at once wrote to offer her marriage. These were the letters which she sent back. Other epistles, making less honourable overtures, were those that obtained no notice whatsoever. All these circumstances got abroad, thus stamping her to be as virtuous as she was incomprehensible. No one could accuse her of endeavouring to thrust herself into good society, because she shunned all those who might have introduced her to the very élite of fashion. Thus the *furor* she excited fully equalled, if not transcended, all the most sanguine expectations of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Meanwhile Horace Sackville was prudently and cautiously helping on the affair. It was he who had dexterously spread the tale relative to Venetia's refusing the dazzling overtures of a certain duke, and he had likewise on two or three occasions thrown out a hint concerning her to the prince regent.

Thus did the first two months of Venetia Trelawney's residence at Acacia Cottage pass away, and then occurred the memorable "Banquet of Six" at the Marquis of Leveson's House in Albemarle Street. On that occasion Venetia Trelawney's name was brought up, but Horace Sackville suffered the other guests to lavish their encomia upon her marvellous beauty ere he volunteered a word. Then, on being directly appealed to by the prince, he said all he could to pique his Royal Highness's curiosity to the fullest extreme, artfully insinuating that if any one could possibly win her upon any terms at all, it could be none other than the prince himself. If the reader will refer to that chapter in which the Banquet of Six is described, he will find how skilfully Horace Sackville played his part upon the occasion, and at the same time how narrowly he watched the prince's countenance, not merely to observe the impression made by all that was passing, but likewise to make sure that he himself did not go too far and thus excite suspicion as to his covert motive. We need not recapitulate all the details of those circumstances under which the memorable love-campaign was agreed upon and the six thousand guineas clubbed to become the reward of the successful aspirant to Venetia's favours.

As a matter of course, everything that thus took place

was duly made known to Venetia on the following day, and she received her instructions from Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, how to act. It was now decided that she should permit herself to become accessible to her suitors, so that by discouraging those whose turns preceded that of the prince her conduct might the more effectually pique his curiosity and rivet his interest. Thus on the Monday, which was the first day of the love-campaign, when she beheld the Earl of Curzon in the park, evidently trusting to the chapter of accidents to furnish him with some means of obtaining access to her, she purposely let her parrot loose to afford him the wished-for opportunity. He was not slow in availing himself of it, and then Venetia had an occasion of playing off upon him all the artillery of those airs of haughty indignation, proud defiance, and cold contempt which she had been practising for more than two months. It was a pleasure for Venetia to humble the self-sufficient nobleman who dared hope to vanquish her who was destined for a far loftier position, and she did humble him. Then, as he went away, her peals of silver laughter proclaimed her triumph.

The next day was the turn of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and as Venetia had heard his character from Horace Sackville, to the effect that he was a good-natured, generous-hearted, offhand, though dissipated young man, she was resolved to treat him very differently from the Earl of Curzon. Moreover, as he actually went and gave a very considerable sum in the purchase of Acacia Cottage and other houses, the whole being salable only as one lot, and this on purpose to obtain a pretext for calling upon her, she felt somewhat flattered by the compliment thus implied, and therefore, when he appeared in her presence, she treated him with the most affable display of good temper. This amiable humour was encouraged on her part by his own conduct, for, as the reader will recollect, he frankly, and we might almost say bluntly, offered her marriage. She had therefore no reason, as indeed she had no desire, to be offended with him; she even took a sort of liking to him, and treated him with a good-natured raillery, which disarmed him of all possible resentment on account of the refusal which his proposition received.

Relative to Colonel Malpas, whose turn came next, Venetia had received a very different character indeed, and she

learned from Horace that he was a thoroughly unprincipled, bad young man. She wished to have an opportunity of settling all his pretensions at once; and as he was intimate with Lady Wenlock, between whom and Mrs. Arbuthnot a long-standing friendship existed, it was easy to have a hint conveyed through that lady to the colonel that Venetia was to be present at the entertainment given by her at Kew. There did Venetia accordingly meet the colonel, but she certainly was not prepared for the detestable menaces to which the unprincipled scoundrel had recourse; and had it not been for the circumstance of Captain Tash being an ear-witness of all that took place, her reputation might have subsequently suffered by the daring assertion of triumph eventually made by the colonel.

Before we continue our explanations relative to the love-campaign of the party of six, we must pause to notice another little incident the date of which properly causes it to require allusion here. We mean the visit which Jocelyn Loftus paid our heroine at No. 13, Stratton Street. Miss Bathurst had given all her servants the requisite instructions what to say in case any one should call and inquire for a Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, or a Miss Clara Stanley. The answer was invariably to be, "that they were out of town, but were shortly expected home." This was the response which Jocelyn received when, provided with Louisa's letter of introduction, he called on the Wednesday in Stratton Street; and returning next day, he was duly introduced into the handsome drawing-room, where he found Clara Stanley. The reader will remember that they were well pleased with each other, for the young lady assumed the most artless, amiable, and unaffected manner, so that she appeared everything that Jocelyn could have expected in his beloved Louisa's elder sister. On the other hand, the good opinion she had previously conceived from Louisa's letters respecting Loftus, and also from the references she had taken concerning him, was fully corroborated by his looks, his manner, and his discourse. She had learned from his banker that he was a young man of good family, with an income of six hundred a year, and still greater expectations; therefore she had from the first highly approved of his suit in respect to Louisa. Now, as above stated, a personal acquaintance ratified all the favourable impressions previously made on

her mind, and she rejoiced unfeignedly that her beloved sister should have won the heart of so excellent a young gentleman. She excused herself for not introducing him to Mr. and Mrs. Beckford on the ground that they were very old people and much fatigued with their excursion into the country on the preceding day; and as Loftus, being but little acquainted with the personages and circumstances of fashionable life, entertained not the remotest idea that he was in the house of a Miss Bathurst, as a matter of course he beheld nought to engender suspicion that any duplicity was being practised. But, ah! when he had taken his departure, how quickly did the long pent-up feelings in our heroine's bosom seek an issue in a flood of tears, and how convulsive were the sobs that her surcharged breast gave forth!

But Venetia had no leisure for thus abandoning herself to her grief, or to the flood of memories relative to her sister and her home, which this interview had so painfully excited. For it was now past noon, and she must get back to Acacia Cottage. Because this was Thursday, the fourth day of the love-campaign, the grandest and most important of all. It was the day, in short, for the prince's visit; for that he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at once there was but little doubt. The reader may remember with what admirable tact she played her cards upon this occasion. She gave him to understand that she was no mere adventuress, no wanton, but as yet a pure virgin; and this was the truth. She however frankly confessed that she had her ambition; and she alluded to the connection between Mrs. Fitzherbert and himself as illustrative of the position which she must stipulate for if she became his mistress.

Then the prince suggested that she should get married to some easy, good-natured person who would either wink at her being the royal mistress, or else positively assent to it. This proposition was fraught with exceeding pleasure for Venetia, inasmuch as she saw that matrimony might be made a sufficient cloak to preserve her reputation, and also (as she hoped) to save her well-beloved Louisa the pain of ever having to blush for her sister. She had for some time observed the affection which Horace Sackville entertained toward her; and, therefore, the instant the prince regent's proposition was made, it struck her that Horace was the convenient husband to be thus obtained. She knew that

his infatuation with regard to her was immense, and though she was no stranger to his natural good qualities, yet she was equally well aware that these had been too much warped and spoiled to be suggestive of any very powerful scruples against a marriage under such circumstances. As to the consent of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert to this marriage, she had little doubt of obtaining it; inasmuch as the main point was that she should become the prince regent's mistress, no matter by what means, so long as the aim was successfully and speedily reached.

The reader will remember that ere the prince parted from her on that occasion he extracted from her a promise that she would visit him at Carlton House on the ensuing evening; and she was to be at Hyde Park corner at nine o'clock, where his carriage was to meet her. But previous to all this, previous, indeed, to calling upon her at all, and therefore while still unaware of the extraordinary beauty of Venetia, as well as being under the infatuation of the lady in the gossamer dress, the prince had made a compact to abandon his chance to the Marquis of Leveson. Now, however, having become an eye-witness of the truth of all the reports that had reached him concerning Venetia's charms, his Royal Highness repented of his bargain with the marquis, and, hastening to visit him, induced his lordship to forego the compact on condition of receiving the vacant Garter.

The prince, however, quite forgot, when returning to Carlton House, to confer the appointment. The marquis thought he was tricked, and on the Friday evening, it being his turn to pursue the love-campaign, he treacherously inveigled Venetia to his mansion. She, however, escaped his clutches, but upon proceeding to Carlton House, she would not abandon herself on this occasion to the prince, fearing that she had not as yet a sufficiently strong hold upon him, and that too easy a surrender would damp his ardour with respect to her.

Venetia did not at once communicate to Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, the arrangement which had been made with the prince about her getting married. She merely intimated that they had come to terms and that she was to be his mistress. She was resolved to wait and see whether Sackville himself would make any tender avowal to her, in which case she would be spared the somewhat un-

feminine task of initiating overtures to him. Besides, she did not wish him to come ready tutored by Miss Bathurst how to act, but she was desirous of assuring herself that Horace would of his own accord accept her as a wife. She felt assured that, inasmuch as he had been dragged into the transaction of the party of six, he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at the cottage, with or without his aunt's consent. She therefore expected him, nor did she expect in vain.

Horace called, and although the conversation began with the observation on his part " that he was the only one who could not plead the suit of love," they nevertheless very soon found themselves deep in a discourse of a tender character. As we have already stated, the passion which Sackville entertained for Venetia amounted to a frenzied infatuation which made him reckless of any terms or conditions which might be attached to such an alliance, and therefore, though knowing everything, aware that she was to become the mistress of the prince, and that she was far too deeply involved in the ramifications of the plot, as well as too securely in Miss Bathurst's power, to think of retreating, he enthusiastically agreed to become her husband.

Then, on the whole arrangement with the prince and with Sackville relative to this matrimonial project being made known to Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert, they cheerfully gave their assent. Indeed, closely connected as Horace was to the former, an additional guarantee for Venetia's continued thraldom to her will seemed to be afforded by such a marriage. Here we need not dwell upon the details of what followed. The reader is well aware how Venetia married Horace Sackville, how he was raised to the peerage, and how they took up their abode at Carlton House.

The next incident which requires explanation refers to that occasion when the prince gave a dinner-party, at which the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Marquis of Leveson were present, and when Venetia overheard a certain conversation between the marquis and his Royal Highness. It will be remembered that the marquis had just returned from Paris, and startling indeed for Venetia were the circumstances which he and the prince on that occasion hurriedly discussed. She learned, in the first place, who Jocelyn Loftus really was, and the revelation immedi-

ately accounted to her for a certain mysteriousness which she observed in the manner of his London banker when some months previously she had called upon that gentleman to take references concerning her sister's suitor. Nevertheless, the discovery now made as to who Jocelyn really was rendered her more satisfied than ever in respect to his projected alliance with Louisa.

But, in the second place, she ascertained from what passed between the marquis and the prince that Loftus was a prisoner at the prefecture of police in Paris, that he had been assailed by extraordinary temptations, of which the profligate Misses Owen were made the agents, but that he had passed immaculate through the ordeal.

In the third place, Venetia discovered that Louisa had been inveigled away from home, that she had been to Paris, that the marquis had brought her back, and that she was at that very moment at his mansion at Albemarle Street.

Lastly, our heroine overheard Lord Leveson go on to state "that Louisa had got a sister somewhere in London, but that there was evidently a mistake relative to the accurate address of this sister's abode."

On hearing these things, Venetia could not altogether restrain the feelings of mingled terror, indignation, and alarm which they were but too well calculated to excite in her bosom. Indeed, as the reader will recollect, she upset her wine-glass in her agitation, and precipitately quitting the room, hastened to her boudoir. There she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction; but seeing the absolute necessity of acting with a promptitude that should avert the threatened storm from breaking over her own head, she at once despatched Jessica to Miss Bathurst to put that lady on her guard relative to the inquiries which were certain to be made in Stratton Street concerning Miss Clara Stanley. Having taken this precaution, she made up her mind how to act in other respects, and, confident of wielding immense power over the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she resolved to enlist their aid in carrying out the twofold purpose she had in view. One object was to rescue her sister from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson, and the other was to effect the liberation of Jocelyn Loftus from the prefecture of police in Paris.

But in the carrying out of both these aims, the utmost

tact, prudence, and judgment were required, in order to avoid compromising herself. In the former case she saw that it was almost certain that the Marquis of Leveson, being himself intimately acquainted with Miss Bathurst, would insist upon full explanations as to all Louisa had told him relative to her sister residing at No. 13, Stratton Street, with persons of the name of Beckford; or else Louisa herself might discover that Clara was not there, nor any such beings as the Beckfords in existence. Therefore, in entrusting Sir Douglas Huntingdon with the delicate task of rescuing Louisa from Leveson House, Venetia was compelled to take him entirely into her confidence. To secure him, however, altogether in her interest, and more effectually to put the seal of secrecy upon his lips, she made up her mind to bestow upon him those favours for which he languished; and in coming to this resolve, she also yielded somewhat to her own inclinations, for the barriers of virtue being completely broken down, it needed but a small impulse thus to urge her on to the gratification of the sensuous passion she had conceived for the baronet. As the reader, however, will recollect, she accidentally gave Lord Curzon the note intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon, so that the nobleman, availing himself of an invitation which he thought was meant for him, was the first to revel in her arms.

This circumstance she did not altogether regret, because, in the first place, Huntingdon proved well satisfied to serve her faithfully and effectually upon the mere promise of a crowning reward, while, in the second place, it was equally necessary to secure the secret devotedness of Curzon in carrying out her object with regard to Loftus. Indeed, the management of this latter affair required as much fidelity as courage. From Louisa's letters, Venetia had learned all that Mary Owen had told her relative to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales, and from those letters likewise had Venetia ascertained the object of Jocelyn's visit to the Continent. But it was only with great risk and danger to her own position and interests that Venetia could act in a manner hostile to the prince regent's views, and to espouse Jocelyn's cause was to adopt that hostile course. Hence the imperious necessity of sealing Curzon's lips relative to the task she entrusted to him, and consequently she regretted but little the misadventure which had at once thrown her

into his arms, for she knew full well that when the service was performed in Paris, he would be sure to come back and claim that same favour as his reward.

The Earl of Curzon, flushed with the triumph he had achieved in at last winning that splendid and seductive woman, cheerfully undertook the commission entrusted to him; and engaging the services of Captain Tash and his man Robin, at once set off for Paris, where he accomplished the deliverance of Jocelyn Loftus in the manner described in an earlier part of our tale. But inasmuch as it for obvious reasons suited Venetia's purpose that Jocelyn should remain ignorant of who the authoress of this proceeding in his favour might be, and that he should obtain no clue to the eventual discovery thereof, his liberators were instructed to disguise themselves personally and also conceal their names, all of which they did.

But in the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon was engaged in the execution of the task that Venetia had confided to him. We must, however, first observe that, as Venetia had foreseen, the Marquis of Leveson went to No. 13, Stratton Street, and seeing his old friend, Miss Bathurst, told her " that a girl named Louisa Stanley was at his house, and that she persisted in declaring that her sister Clara was residing with a certain Mr. and Mrs. Beckford there, at the said No. 13, Stratton Street." Miss Bathurst could not conceal her dismay at this announcement, for she naturally fancied that Louisa would persevere in her inquiries after her sister, that the marquis would aid her, and that a complete discovery and exposure would ensue. In this dilemma Miss Bathurst threw herself upon the mercy of her old friend the Marquis of Leveson, and confided to him everything, beseeching his assistance in devising some excuse to satisfy Louisa and divert her from further inquiries relative to her sister. The marquis, secretly overjoyed at having elicited such an important revelation, which suddenly put the brilliant Venetia (as he hoped) completely in his power, readily promised to further Miss Bathurst's views. He of course had nothing to gain by giving publicity to what he had thus discovered, but, on the contrary, it was by keeping the secret that he expected to reduce the haughty Lady Sackville to submission.

Reassuring Miss Bathurst as to the course he should

adopt, he returned to Albemarle Street, and represented to Louisa that her sister Clara was out of town with the Beckfords for a week or ten days. Miss Bathurst immediately sent to Venetia to tell her what had occurred, but in the interval Sir Douglas Huntingdon had received our heroine's instructions to rescue Louisa at any risk, and no matter under what circumstances, from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. She had likewise desired him to take Louisa at once to Stratton Street, and thither did Venetia herself repair, to resume her character of plain and simple Clara Stanley once more, and await her sister's coming. We have seen how Sir Douglas arrived at Leveson House in the very nick of time to deliver the beauteous young maiden from the unprincipled old nobleman, and how in his own carriage he bore her to Stratton Street, telling her on the way that her sister Clara had unexpectedly come up to town.

We need but cast a brief retrospective glance over the meeting which then took place between the sisters. On that occasion Clara assured Louisa that her lover Jocelyn was innocent of the base things imputed to him, that he had passed scatheless through the ordeal of unparalleled temptations, and that he himself would in due time reveal what his real name was, and give satisfactory explanations for having adopted an assumed one. She likewise gave Louisa the assurance that he would shortly be free; and in every respect did she do her best to cheer and console her well-beloved sister.

Venetia was then about to touch upon matters intimately concerning herself. She saw how dangerous it was to keep her sister in the dark on that head any longer, and that the time was come when she should give at least some explanations respecting her own affairs. She purported, indeed, to announce the important fact that she was married, that she was a peeress, and that her husband occupied a high post in the prince regent's household. But suddenly the artless and innocent Louisa began to give utterance to everything that Lady Ernestina Dysart had told her relative to " a certain Venetia Trelawney, now Lady Sackville and mistress of the prince," so that the unhappy young woman, horrified at hearing her own history thus dwelt on so pointedly by her unsuspecting sister, could not for worlds have found courage to make the revelation a moment before

resolved on. With a hastily devised apology for bidding Louisa so abrupt a farewell, and with the old standard excuse for not presenting her to the Beckfords, she lost no time in sending her off to Canterbury.

The next incident to which we must call attention was one connected with the private theatricals that took place at Carlton House. On that occasion, be it remembered, Jocelyn Loftus, when there for the purpose of seeking an interview with the prince, recognized Clara Stanley in the brilliant Lady Sackville. His astonishment knew no bounds and for Louisa's sake was he deeply, deeply grieved. Having seen the elder sister's letters from London to his beloved Louisa, he knew that this dear girl was utterly ignorant of Clara's career under the name of Venetia, and he therefore at once formed the resolve not to enlighten Louisa upon the subject on his return to Canterbury. He did not then foresee that a second visit to the Continent would be prolonged for seven months, and he thought that it would be better to wait until his return ere he made so startling a revelation to his betrothed as that her own sister and the Venetia of whom she had heard so much evil were identical. Nor did he present himself to Lady Sackville on this occasion, but he wrote her a long letter, the receipt of which affected her greatly.

The reader will remember it was on the same occasion when she found the Marquis of Leveson's pearls in her boudoir that Jocelyn's letter came to hand. Therein he observed, in grave but what might be termed brotherly remonstrance, that she had evidently practised many deceits and strange duplicities toward her confiding sister, but that still he was not disposed to blame her too severely, as the whole tenor of her conduct proved that she not only continued to love that sister well, but had kept her aloof from her own sphere of brilliant dissipation. Jocelyn went on to say, in his letter, that he should not reveal to Louisa's ears, at least for the present, the discovery he had made, that it was probable he should have to leave England for a few weeks, but that on his return he should seek an interview with Lady Sackville, in order to arrange the best means of communicating the secret to Louisa. Loftus then proceeded to observe that inasmuch as Lady Sackville had learned from her sister's letters many of the particulars respecting the fearful

conspiracy then in progress against the honour, happiness, and even the life of the Princess of Wales, it was her bounden duty, possessing as she did an all-powerful influence with the prince regent, to do her best to awaken him to a sense of duty, and at least persuade him to forbear from direct persecution against his unfortunate wife, even if he chose to continue separated from her.

Such was the substance of the letter which Jocelyn Loftus wrote on that occasion, and Venetia felt all the latent generosity of her nature aroused on behalf of the Princess of Wales. She moreover calculated that if she could succeed, by secret and indirect means, in breaking up the conspiracy, it would be a deed to tell materially in her favour, not only in the estimation of Jocelyn Loftus, but likewise in the opinion of her sister Louisa when the day should come for making the announcement that herself and Lady Sackville were one and the same person. But for the reasons above set forth, Venetia could not possibly work otherwise than insidiously and privately against those conspirators of whom her royal lover was at the head. To be detected in espousing his wife's cause would be to risk her position at the palace, and to be expelled in utter disgrace from the atmosphere of the court. She therefore resolved to employ the Earl of Curzon once more, and at the same time accident again brought Malpas to her notice. On this occasion it was as a broken-down spendthrift and a ruined man that he stood before her, and much as she detested the colonel, she nevertheless regarded him as an instrument exactly fitted for her purpose. She knew how thoroughly unprincipled he was, and that he would hesitate at nothing in order to carry out a purpose, while his necessities seemed to place him altogether at her mercy. Hence the commissions which she gave for the Earl of Curzon and to Colonel Malpas to proceed to the Continent, and, by worming themselves into the favour of the profligate Misses Owen, seize any opportunities that might occur of withdrawing them from the sphere where their presence was so fraught with danger.

We have now no further explanations to give relative to Venetia's career, nor to elucidate the mysteries of her conduct on past occasions. We may, however, pause to observe, ere concluding this chapter, that from the moment she became the royal mistress she was enabled fully to carry

out the designs of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. All the relatives, even to the remotest cousins of these two ladies, were well provided for. Pensions, places, and sinecures were conferred upon some, quick promotion in the military and civil services was obtained for others. The prince grumbled sometimes at these demands upon him, and sometimes he contented himself with merely expressing his astonishment that Venetia should use her interest almost exclusively on behalf of two families. But he never refused compliance with her requests. The last demand that she made upon him ere her visit to Canterbury was to have Miss Bathurst's name placed upon the pension list, and as Horace was so closely related to that lady, the prayer did not seem unnatural on Venetia's part. The prince grumbled for a few moments, and at length yielded his consent, so that the name of Elizabeth Bathurst was speedily introduced upon the pension list for an income of seven hundred pounds a year, "in consideration of the eminent services of her late father," who was a general in the army, but being a mere drawing-room soldier, had always managed to command garrisons at home, and had never seen a hostile shot fired in his life.

Altogether, down to the period at which we have brought our narrative, Venetia had more than fulfilled the expectations which Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert formed when they devised the memorable intrigue that wafted her upon the glowing sea of fashionable life. The three thousand pounds which those two ladies had advanced for the equipment of the charming vessel that was thus launched had been amply repaid fifty-fold in the rich cargo which it was constantly bearing into port, and thus was the original design crowned with the most extraordinary success.

CHAPTER XXI

CLARA AT HOME

Clara Stanley was now at home once more. Yet she no longer bore the name of Stanley. She was the titled Lady Sackville, wife of an English peer, and surely this humble cottage could scarcely be called a home for her who had been accustomed to dwell in the gilded saloons of Carlton House.

Yet when her sister Louisa was recovered from the swoon into which she had fallen on the discovery that Clara and Venetia were one and the same person, yet, we say, did the charming and ingenuous girl pour forth ten thousand cordial welcomes for the long absent one who had returned again. With floods of tears did Clara strain the charming girl to her bosom, while their half-brother Valentine and their two aunts, Mrs. Owen and Lilian, all stood by deeply affected. The mystery relative to Valentine Malvern was speedily cleared up, and the amazed Louisa, on comprehending the degree of relationship in which she stood to the young gentleman, received his fraternal embrace.

Mrs. Owen undertook the task of proceeding up-stairs to prepare the way for Clara's interview with her invalid aunt; and without entering into details, we need only say that in a few minutes Clara herself hastened to the sick-room, and was received in the arms of that fond relative who had for so many years supplied to her the place of her lost mother.

In the course of the evening of this memorable day, Clara gave her three aunts her entire history, as in London, on the previous day, she had given it to Valentine Malvern, of course suppressing all those particulars relative to the Marquis of Leveson, Colonel Malpas, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, which she would have perished rather than

reveal. Louisa was not present when Clara thus performed the painful duty of reciting her narrative to her three aunts, and it was not until the sisters had an opportunity of being alone together in the evening, and when seated in the shady arbour in the garden, that Louisa obtained any insight into that strange, romantic, and even wondrous career which had elevated her sister to the peerage. Nor will the reader blame Clara if she withheld as much as possible of the details that were most likely to shock the pure mind of her innocent and artless sister. Nevertheless, she could not conceal the circumstance of her intimate connection with the prince regent. Louisa's generous disposition naturally suggested as many excuses as possible for the errors into which Clara had been led, and it was in some such terms as these that the young damsel gave expression to her feelings:

"I can picture to myself, dearest Clara, the bewilderment of horror and dismay into which you must have been thrown when suddenly finding yourself homeless, friendless, and penniless in the streets of London; and never can I forget that you have now told me in language of the most touching pathos how it was for the purpose of saving myself and our then paralyzed and helpless relative from the direst penury that you threw yourself at the mercy of that Miss Bathurst who made you such brilliant promises. Whatever you may have done, then, must receive no reproach from my lips. No, dearest, dearest sister, never can I reproach you. On the contrary, a veil must be drawn over all that it is unpleasant to look back upon. But, tell me, oh, tell me from your own lips, give me the solemn assurance that you will never return to the royal palace, and then I shall be happy, truly happy."

"Louisa, you talk to me like an angel," exclaimed Clara, winding her arms about her sister's neck, and straining her in the fondest embrace. "When I crossed the threshold of Carlton House this morning, I solemnly vowed in the depths of my soul that I was then taking leave of that palace for ever."

"Oh, Clara, if you will only keep this vow," cried Louisa, "you will more than atone for the past."

"I will keep it," was Lady Sackville's firm and sincere response. "I have already given our dear aunt that same assurance, and she also has forgiven me, she also has prom-

ised to overlook the past on those same terms. Whatever amount of ambition I may have once entertained has been more than gratified. I have shone in the sphere of fashion, I have been the star of courtly circles, and my soul is sated with the dissipations thereof. So far from experiencing a pang, it is with delight that I hail my emancipation from the golden chains in which my late position held me enthralled. Farewell, then, for ever to that sphere of fashion! Farewell for ever to that courtly circle! I have every reason to believe that my husband, who, in sooth, possesses many excellent qualities, Louisa, will likewise be well pleased to retire into the comparative seclusion of domestic life. We possess rank, and a revenue which for all our purposes may be regarded as a handsome fortune. And now, too, that the past is known to my dear relatives, that I no longer harbour secrets which keep the soul in a constant tremor lest some accident should betray them, I feel happier than I have been for a long, long time past. Oh, Louisa, is not this a day that will be ever memorable in our existence? It is on this day that your sister has been restored to you, that I have brought a brother to embrace you, and that, all the mysteries of our birth being cleared up, we find that we have two other relatives in Mrs. Owen and Miss Lilian Halkin."

"Yes," observed Louisa, in a low voice full of emotion, "it is indeed a memorable day. But it will not the less prove a happy one for me if you, dear Clara, will indeed consent to retire from the sphere of fashion and dwell henceforth in the midst of domestic enjoyments."

"And you think," whispered Clara, in a subdued and tremulous tone, "that the virtuous, the high-minded young man who is shortly coming to make you his wife will consent to acknowledge me as his sister?"

"Oh, can you for a moment doubt it?" asked Louisa, in a tone gently reproaching Clara for even having entertained such an apprehension.

"I know he will do everything for your sake, Louisa," rejoined Lady Sackville, "and therefore, when you assure him of my good resolutions for the future, he will not only believe you, but will treat me with kindness. Oh, there is a secret that trembles upon my tongue, but I will not reveal it. No, it shall be for your lover himself to choose his own

good time, and also adopt his own manner, to make you acquainted with his real name and explain wherefore he ever assumed a fictitious one."

"Yes, that is his secret," said Louisa, "and from his lips only must I receive the revelation. Besides, I experience no undue curiosity in that respect, for whatever may be his real position in life, it is he only whom I love, and if he never revealed himself to me as aught besides simple Jocelyn Loftus, that affection would sustain no diminution."

In this manner did the two young ladies remain conversing for some time, until the servant who had been despatched to the Fountain Hotel returned with Mary Owen. And now was this young lady enabled to clasp Louisa in her arms and call her by the endearing name of cousin. Then Clara was presented to Mary Owen, also as a cousin, and they embraced; but infinite was the surprise of the young girl to hear of the identity of Louisa's sister with the brilliant Lady Sackville. Nor less was she amazed to learn that Sir Valentine Malvern was the half-brother of the two sisters. Yes, it was indeed a complete family party assembled at the cottage that evening; and although there were naturally many painful memories, yet the circle of united relatives was not without its experiences of present happiness and of hope for the future.

Clara took up her abode at the cottage in order that she might not even for a few hours be separated from her sister. Mrs. Owen, Mary, and Sir Valentine Malvern returned to the Fountain Hotel, and Lilian repaired to her humble lodging at the peasant's hut. On the following day Clara passed many hours in writing. She addressed a brief letter to the prince regent, taking an eternal adieu of him, thanking him for the many kindnesses she had received at his hands, beseeching that he would adopt no measures in the hope of recalling her to Carlton House, and concluding with the intimation that her husband would explain to him her motives for so suddenly abandoning a court life and retiring into comparative seclusion. She next wrote a letter to Miss Bathurst, stating that the drama in which she had played so conspicuous a part was now at an end, never to be resumed, — at least by her; and she likewise terminated with the remark that Horace would give all requisite explanations. She then drew up a very long, earnest, and touching

letter to her husband, telling him everything that had occurred, her motives for so suddenly leaving London, and her unchangeable resolve to withdraw altogether from the theatre of her former triumphs. She reminded him of the many touching scenes which had occurred between them, and which had proved at the time such chastening and salutary episodes amidst the career of dissipation and profligacy that they had been pursuing. She used every argument and called into requisition every possible appeal to persuade Horace to resign the stewardship in the royal household and lose no time in joining her at Canterbury, so that they might debate upon their future plans. With reference to the debts which Horace might have contracted, she stated that Sir Valentine Malvern's liberality would ensure the speedy settlement of them all, and that, indeed, her half-brother had generously volunteered to become Horace's banker the moment she hinted to him the existence of such liabilities. Finally she explained the contents of the letters she had written to the prince regent and Miss Bathurst, leaving it to Horace to give just such explanations as he might think fit.

In penning this correspondence a large portion of the day was passed. In the evening the family party reassembled again, and now the memories of the past were less painful, and the happiness of the present more real, while the hopes for the future seemed brighter.

On the following day Mrs. Owen and Mary said farewell and took their departure for Dover, whence they were to embark for the Continent on their way to Geneva. Valentine Malvern also said his adieus to the inmates of the cottage, and set out for London as the bearer of Lady Sackville's letters. Lilian paid but a brief visit to her sister and nieces this day, and appeared more melancholy than usual; but when affectionately questioned as to the cause, she merely observed that she felt a deep despondency of spirits, as if a presentiment of evil were weighing on her mind, and then somewhat abruptly took her departure.

Miss Stanley, for by this name did she still resolve to pass, as the resumption of her real one of Halkin would only excite disagreeable attention amongst the people of Canterbury, had so far recovered her strength that she was now enabled by the assistance of her two nieces to descend from

her chamber, and supported between the magnificent Clara and the charming Louisa, she walked forth into the garden, thus breathing the fresh air of heaven for the first time after a long interval of three years.

For the present must we take leave of the cottage near Canterbury, and again direct the reader's attention to the mighty world of London, for we have yet many things to relate and many characters to dispose of ere we can bring our labours in this narrative to an end, and prepare to draw up the curtain upon some new drama for which our imagination is yet stored with so many materials.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SICK-BED

Return we now to the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson in Albemarle Street. The nobleman himself was awaiting with a considerable degree of anxiety the result of a consultation which those learned and excellent gentlemen, Doctor Thurston and Doctor Copperas, were holding together in the Crimson Drawing-room. The object of this consultation was the very dangerous aspect which the illness of Lady Ernestina Dysart had assumed, and the marquis, who had always been attached to his niece, entertained the utmost apprehension on her account. Moreover, as she had been assailed by frequent fits of delirium, at which times she had said in her ravings many things that must have sounded extremely strange to the ears of the two physicians when in attendance upon her, the marquis was not a little afraid that they might fancy those things to have a somewhat more substantial foundation than the mere fevered imagination of her ladyship, and thus did he await with a painful anxiety and suspense the result of the consultation they were now holding.

But let us peep into the Crimson Drawing-room and behold the manner in which the two physicians conducted this important deliberation. Refreshments had been placed upon the table, and while Doctor Copperas was profoundly engaged in the anatomy of a cold fowl, Doctor Thurston was as scientifically occupied with experiments upon the contents of a pigeon-pie. The marquis's brown sherry likewise appeared to come in for its share of attention, and while thus comfortably occupied, the two physicians discoursed in the following manner.

"Well, my dear Thurston," observed Doctor Copperas,

"I think you and I have played uncommonly well into each other's hands for some years past."

"And we have feathered our nests accordingly," answered Thurston. "But I very much fear that our profession, to which we are so deeply attached, is menaced by a variety of newfangled doctrines."

"No doubt of it," replied Copperas. "We must write down all attempts at innovation. Wherever we see an individual propounding doctrines calculated to simplify the medical art and destroy its delusions, we must gibbet him unmercifully in the professional publications."

"Oh, of course," rejoined Doctor Thurston. "Not but that the present system will last our time. We are, however, in honour bound to hand it down intact to the rising generation of medical men. Fees, my dear friend, are the very life and soul of our profession."

"To be sure, and so here is success to fees," said Doctor Copperas, pouring out another glass of sherry.

"And consultations, too," added Thurston. "We must always recommend the propriety of consultations in any doubtful cases."

"By the bye," interjected Doctor Copperas, "was it not uncommon good the other day, when the old Dowager Countess of Catamaran cut her thumb with a penknife, and I persuaded her that a consultation was absolutely necessary? I knew she was good for a fee of ten guineas each, and that she liked the solemnity and importance attendant upon a consultation. Besides, she was in a desperate fright. So I thought I would humour her."

"Do tell me how you managed it," said Doctor Thurston, laughing.

"I will," said Doctor Copperas. "But, to start from the beginning, I must tell you that her ladyship's fat footman came puffing and blowing in the greatest consternation to my house, declaring that her ladyship had met with a most serious accident, and beseeching that I would come directly. So away I went, and on arriving at Catamaran House, I found her ladyship stretched upon the sofa, with two lady's-maids bending over her, one binding a cambric handkerchief around her hand, the other bathing her head with vinegar and water, while three French poodles, instinctively feeling that something was the matter with their beloved mistress, were

standing up with their forepaws against the sofa, all whining piteously. I assumed on entering my most solemn looks, and advancing up to the sofa, asked, in that low, lugubrious tone which we, friend Thurston, know so well how to assume at times, what was the matter? The two lady's-maids burst into tears, the countess groaned audibly, and one of the poodles, leaping up on her, knocked the basin of vinegar and water out of the maid's hand. This little incident aggravated her ladyship's misery, but she begged and besought that the poor dear darling duck of a pet — meaning the vile, ugly French poodle — might not be hurt. ' Poor dear,' she murmured, in a voice as if she were about to give up the ghost, ' it would break its little heart to be scolded.' Well, the liquid being wiped off her ladyship's splendid satin dress, she said, in a dying tone, ' Oh, dear Doctor Copperas, I am so glad you have come. I was mending a pen, when the knife cut a great gash in my thumb, and I am afraid that the blade was the least, least thing rusty. Tell me, dear doctor, whether you think there is any danger.' I shook my head gloomily, observing that it would not be proper for me, either as her ladyship's friend or professional adviser, to declare that there was no danger, but I would do my best to avert it. She said ' that, thank God, she was resigned to the worst,' and I accordingly proceeded to examine the wound, one of the maids having with exquisite care and tenderness removed the cambric bandage.

" Really I had some trouble in preserving my gravity, but seeing a consultation in the perspective, I shook my head again, said something about the danger attendant on a cut from a rusty knife, and dropped a hint about the possibility of lockjaw. The countess groaned, her maids once more burst into tears, and the poodles whined; but I bade her ladyship and the servant-girls muster up all their fortitude, while I endeavoured to tranquillize the poodles by patting them, narrowly escaping, however, a bite from one which snapped at me. Her ladyship then asked me if I did not think she had better go to bed. I felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, and told her gravely that there was certainly fever, and she had better do so, although she was really in such a good state of health that she could as easily have devoured the whole of this cold fowl as I have now eaten the two wings. Well, she went to bed, and I took my departure, having left a pre-

scription. Of course I gave her some medicine to make her feel uncommon uneasy, and when I called again in the evening she had, as I foresaw, worried herself into a very decent state of fever. Again I prescribed and went away, leaving orders that I was to be fetched, no matter at what hour of the night, if her ladyship should feel at all worse. As a matter of course, the instructions I thus gave terrified her ladyship into a still higher state of fever, and at seven o'clock in the morning I was hurriedly fetched. Then it was I gravely recommended a consultation. The countess asked me whom I would like to have called in. I affected to deliberate with myself, and after a brief pause said that I did not like to recommend any particular individual in such cases, but that if there were one who more than another had specially devoted himself to the dangers attendant upon severe injuries with sharp instruments, that eminent individual was Doctor Thurston. You know the rest."

Doctor Thurston laughed with a sort of inward chuckle at this narrative, and again the two learned physicians drank a glass of sherry to the success of fees in general and their own in particular.

"And now, what about our fair patient beneath this roof?" said Doctor Copperas.

"Oh, ah," observed Thurston, "I almost forgot what we were here for. But did you notice the strange things she has uttered in her ravings, accusing herself of having conspired with the prince regent to send her own husband to the scaffold, and having caused the death of Sir Archibald Malvern by having him suffocated in a bath?"

"Yes, but all this was not the worst," remarked Doctor Copperas. "She talked of having been ravished by the public executioner."

"I remember," rejoined Thurston. "What did you think of all that?"

"Humph!" observed Copperas, "I hardly know what to say. We are well aware that strange truths do peep forth in these ravings, and we likewise know that ladies of quality do queer things. There is doubtless some foundation for her self-accusings. For my part, I think it is clear enough she has been intimate with the prince regent. His name is ever uppermost in her mind. But as for the ravishing affair, that seems so utterly inconsistent, so very improbable —"

"Oh, of course!" interrupted Thurston. "But do you not think it would be as well to let the marquis understand that we consider his niece's honour to be entirely in our keeping? It might influence the amount of fees, you know, friend Copperas."

"So it might, friend Thurston," was the response. "Now, then, let us ring for the marquis."

Thereupon the two physicians rose from the table, rang the bell, and then retreated together to one of the window recesses, where they stood holding each other by the button-hole, assuming the most serious air, and looking, for all the world, as if they had merely just taken some hurried refreshment and had been the greater part of the time in earnest and profound consultation together.

A servant entered, and one of them told him, in a grave voice, to request the presence of the marquis. The domestic retired, and soon afterward Lord Leveson made his appearance. But the two doctors affected to be so deeply engaged in their consultation as not to observe his entrance, while they went on talking in the most serious manner possible, shaking their heads, and mingling such a host of technical terms with their discourse as to render it unintelligible as the Cherokee language itself to the bewildered marquis.

"Ah! here is his lordship," said Doctor Copperas, now pretending to observe the nobleman.

"Well, gentlemen," said Lord Leveson, "what tidings have you for me?"

Both the doctors shook their heads, and Thurston proceeded to say, "My dear marquis, can you put confidence in the nurse and the maid who are in attendance upon Lady Ernestina?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired the nobleman, his countenance expressive of alarm and anxiety.

"Because, my dear marquis," continued Doctor Thurston, "if there be one eminent member of the faculty who more than another has devoted himself to the study of delirium in all its phases, and who therefore is experienced in judging how far the ravings of the invalid are founded upon truth, that one is Doctor Copperas."

"I cannot consent to receive a compliment," said the amiable gentleman thus referred to, "at the expense of

your own experiences, Doctor Thurston, in febrile maladies and the delirium accompanying them."

"Well, well, gentlemen," interrupted the marquis, somewhat impatiently, "tell me what you mean. Is it that you apprehend that my niece may betray some secret matters which in her rational moments she would fain conceal?"

"To speak the truth candidly," answered Doctor Thurston, "that is precisely what we do mean. Therefore we earnestly recommend your lordship to secure the silence of the nurse and the lady's-maid. Money will do wonders in putting a seal upon the lips, will it not, Doctor Copperas?"

"It will, Doctor Thurston," replied the learned physician, with a courteous bow, for these two eminent men invariably made it a rule never to appear too intimate with each other in the presence of a third party.

"Oh, as for that," said the marquis, scarcely able to conceal his vexation, "I can answer for the lady's-maid; she is fidelity and prudence personified. As for the nurse, I will line her pockets with gold. Of course the honour of your profession will induce you, gentlemen, to keep to yourselves whatever you may have heard fall from my niece's lips in her delirium?"

"Oh, as a matter of course, my dear marquis," said Doctor Thurston.

"Beyond all doubt," added Doctor Copperas.

Lord Leveson stepped aside to one of the windows for a moment, took out a bundle of bank-notes from his pocket, selected two of a hundred pounds each, and presenting one to Doctor Thurston and the other to Doctor Copperas, he observed, in a significant manner, "I rely upon your secrecy."

They renewed the assurance of strict honour in the matter, and then proceeded to inform his lordship that, after a long, serious, and mature deliberation, they had come to the conclusion that Lady Ernestina Dysart was in a state of the utmost danger, that nothing but their unwearied attention could assist the patient in wrestling against her malady, and that they would therefore do themselves the pleasure of calling three times a day, unless sent for oftener.

When they had taken their departure, after having left a prescription, the Marquis of Leveson proceeded to the in-

valid's chamber. Lady Ernestina was now asleep, but the marquis sat down by her bedside, watching for her to awake. The nurse and lady's-maid were both in the room, the former dozing in a great armchair, the latter treading about on tiptoe, putting things to rights. Several bottles of medicine were upon the mantel, and there was every indication about the apartment to show that Ernestina was really very ill.

The marquis, sitting himself down by the bedside, gazed upon her long and mournfully. She was frightfully altered. But a few days had elapsed since, through the fearful outrages of the Hangman, she had been stretched upon that sick-bed, and yet it seemed as if the ravages of years had wreaked upon her their searing, scathing, blighting ills. The natural plumpness of her flesh had yielded to haggardness of the countenance and emaciation of the person. Her cheeks were sunken and ghastly, her eyes were surrounded by a deep blue tint, her nose was thin and pointed, her lips were well-nigh colourless, the splendour of the bust was disappearing rapidly. And all this was the work of a few short days.

The very room seemed to be filled with the atmosphere of death, and as the marquis sat contemplating the wreck which his niece had become, and thought of the ruin, too, which she must remain, even if she recovered from this dangerous illness, certain compunctious feelings crept into his heart. For here we must observe that, having in the first instance learned from her ravings enough to make him suspect the nature of the outrage which she had received at the hands of the Hangman, he had subsequently questioned her, when alone with her, and in one of her lucid intervals, relative to the fearful secret which seemed to weigh upon her mind. Then was it that in the bitterest agonies of mingled grief and horror and self-loathing she had confessed all to him.

Now, therefore, as he sat gazing upon her, he thought that if after her husband's death upon the scaffold he had removed her to one of his country-seats, and there remained to watch over her and save her from pursuing the career of profligacy on which she had then already entered, he might have averted all these evils beneath the weight of which she was now succumbing. But instead of doing that he had allowed her to remain at Leveson House, within those walls which contained the apartments filled with pictorial

and sculptured obscenities; and he had likewise encouraged her, as it were, in her own depravities, by making her his accomplice in his attempt to deprive Louisa Stanley of her innocence. As he now beheld her stretched before him with faded beauties and ruined charms, a ghastly wreck in the vigor of youthfulness, the mere shadow of the splendid being that she so lately was, his heart smote him bitterly, bitterly, and he thought that in all this he recognized the evidence of a superhuman retribution.

Now he wished to speak seriously with his niece, but she still slept on. For a time the fever had left her. There was not even a trace of its tint upon her cheeks, but all was wan and ghastly there. Two hours elapsed, and still she awoke not. The marquis's dinner-hour arrived, and he descended to the parlour where the repast was served, leaving instructions that he was to be summoned to the sick-chamber so soon as the invalid should awake.

It was not until nine o'clock in the evening that Ernestina opened her eyes. The fever had entirely left her, but she was weak almost to powerlessness. The medicine which had been prescribed was given her, and the nurse then sent to fetch the marquis. When he came he desired to be left alone with the invalid. The lady's-maid and the nurse accordingly quitted the room, and placing himself by the side of the couch, he took his niece's hand, saying, "My poor Ernestina, you have been very ill, you are yet very ill."

"Yes," she answered, in a low, plaintive voice, "I feel as if the hand of death were upon me."

"Do not speak thus despondingly, my dear niece," said Lord Leveson. "I have come on the present occasion on purpose to see if there be anything I can do to ease your mind of whatever annoyances may be pressing upon it. I have sent the nurse and maid away from the room, in order that you may speak without reservation."

"Ah! my dear uncle," exclaimed Ernestina, her voice suddenly swelling with a degree of excitement, "you then entertain the fear that this is my death-bed? Yes, I see by your look that such is the case. Perhaps the physicians have told you so? And, ah!" she continued, without waiting for his reply, "I also apprehend the worst. Would to God that I were prepared for it! I have had my omens, my warnings, ay, fearful warnings. Have I not been delirious?

Have I not raved? Yes, I remember that it was in those ravings I revealed the terrible secret which made you question me the other day. Oh, what must be thought by those who have overheard me!"

"Compose yourself, my dear Ernestina," said the marquis. Then, hesitating not at a falsehood in order to tranquillize her, he added, "Those who have been present at your bedside when the delirium of fever was upon you attach no significancy to anything you may have said. In such a state of mind invalids give utterance to the wildest and the most improbable as well as the most monstrous things."

"Monstrous indeed!" said Ernestina, shuddering visibly. "But unhappily all the monstrosities to which I may have given utterance were based on truth, terrible, terrible truth. Just now I said that I had received omens and warnings, and I have so. In my dreams have I beheld frightful objects. I have seen my husband draw aside the curtain and gaze upon me, with the halter around his neck, and his features all distorted with the agonies of strangulation. Ah! and how frightfully did he glare upon me with his stony eyes! How fiendish, how diabolical was the look of malignant hate that grew upon those convulsed features! O my God! it was terrible, terrible!"

"Ernestina, you will excite yourself," exclaimed the marquis, "into delirium once more. Do, I beseech you, compose your feelings. Tranquillize yourself, give not way to these appalling ideas."

"But they force themselves upon my mind," answered Ernestina, bitterly. "And what I have told you was not all. Not merely have I seen my husband standing by the side of the couch, there, in the very spot where you are now seated, but I have likewise beheld the dreadful man — O God! I cannot name him — whose outrage has reduced me to what I am. Ah, the agonizing sense of that outrage will be my death. It was the most hideous of pollutions," and the wretched lady writhed convulsively in her couch.

"Ernestina, you must change the current of your ideas," said the marquis. "For Heaven's sake, let us talk of something else."

"Wait a moment," said his niece. "This thing is uppermost in my mind, and I must speak of it. Listen, then. It was one night, — I do not know which, for I have not

been able to keep any note of the lapse of time, — but I remember full well that I awoke, and looking around, beheld the nurse sleeping in her armchair. The tapers were alight on the mantel, and a solemn silence prevailed in the room, broken only by the regular breathing of the woman. I became wide awake, and was in as full possession of my intellects as I am at this moment. All of a sudden it seemed to me that I heard the door open; but I did not think anything of it, as I fancied it might be still early in the night and that the maid was coming in to see me ere retiring for good. But you may fancy the mortal terror that fastened itself upon me when I saw the figure of a man steal in on tiptoe, stop to assure himself that the nurse was sleeping, and then creep in the same stealthy manner up to the foot of the bed.

"I could not cry out; I was paralyzed with the stupor of consternation, for I had no difficulty in recognizing that monster in human shape who has caused me such indescribable misery. He saw my eyes fixed upon him, and as I gave not utterance to even the faintest sound, he doubtless comprehended how completely terror had stupefied my senses. Oh, if I were to live a thousand years, I should not forget the diabolical expression of gratified revenge which gradually expanded over his features, making them seem ten thousand times more hideous than they naturally are. His eyes appeared to gleam like those of a snake with a vibrating light that sent the chill of death to my heart's core. For upwards of a minute did he thus stand glaring upon me, and then, leaning far over from the foot of the bed, he whispered, with a sort of hissing sound, 'Am I not revenged? You would have left me to perish in that cursed chair; but, thanks to your uncle's amour with Lady Sackville, I escaped. And now it is you who perish. Yes, you are dying with shame, because you have been the Hangman's mistress. Well, you will go to join your husband, whom you sent through my hands to prepare your way. Don't think, however, that if you do live on, I shall leave you unmolested. No, in a night or two I shall come and see you again. I don't think, for your own sake, you will tell those about you that you expect such a visitor. So I have nothing to fear on that score. But you may perhaps fancy to-morrow, when you awake again, that this was a dream. Here is something to prove that it was

not.' And drawing out his great clasp-knife, he thrust it through the bed-curtain. Immediately afterward he took his departure, stealing out of the room as noiselessly as he had entered it, and I swooned away."

"Heavens! what is all this I hear?" exclaimed the marquis, who had listened with an awful interest to the narrative. "Dares the villain persecute you thus? But no, it can have been nought save a dream."

"No, my dear uncle," answered Lady Ernestina, "it is no dream. Behold!" and she pointed to one of the curtains at the foot of the four-post bedstead.

The marquis, springing from his seat, hastened to inspect the drapery, and there, sure enough, was the hole, or, rather, slit, about half an inch long, and evidently made by a sharp knife passed through the curtain. His countenance became very pale, his lips quivered with rage, and returning to his seat by the bedside, he said, "Yes, my dear niece, it is indeed but too evident that the miscreant has been here. Oh, what can I do to guard against further intrusions on his part? It is clear that the ruffian defies bolts and bars, and penetrates into any house which it suits his purpose to enter. Nevertheless I will see if I cannot stop him in future. Devising some excuse for the precaution, I will presently give orders that two of the men servants shall watch down-stairs all night, with loaded pistols, and I will charge them that they unhesitatingly and mercilessly shoot down any intruder."

"Yes, if you will do this, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, "you will relieve me of the cruelest apprehensions."

"But why, my dear child," asked Lord Leveson, "did you not tell me of all this before? I would have adopted the precautions I am now about to take."

"Oh, if you only knew with what bitter repugnance I allude to that monster," said Ernestina, "you would understand why I have not before confided to you the circumstance of his visit. On the present occasion, however, some feeling for which I cannot account has urged me to give you all these explanations, and likewise inspired me with the courage and power to do so. But ere now, my dear uncle, at the beginning of this conversation, you observed that if there were anything you could do to ease my mind it should be done. Alas, I know that I am dying, I feel that

I shall never quit this couch again, except to be laid in my coffin. There is therefore one request which I have to make — "

"Name it, Ernestina, name it," cried the marquis, "and if it be in my power to grant it, rest assured that it shall be cheerfully fulfilled."

"I could wish to see my brother Algernon before I die," said Ernestina. "Will you despatch messengers to fetch him hither, with the least possible delay?"

"You know, my dear Ernestina," replied the marquis, "that he is on the Continent. I told you some days ago all that he has been doing — "

"But if you despatch trusty envoys," interrupted the invalid, "with positive orders to travel night and day, can he not be brought back speedily? Oh, if you write but a few lines to inform him that his sister is dying, and that she implores him to come and see her, if only for a few instants, ere the hand of death shall close her eyes for ever, think you that he will not hasten to obey the summons? Yes, Algernon possesses a noble and a generous heart, and he will come, I feel persuaded that he will come. Grant me this request; it is the last, perhaps, I shall ever make, and you cannot conceive how great would be the relief to my soul to know that Algernon had been sent for."

"Not a moment's delay shall take place, my dear niece," replied her uncle, "ere the necessary measures are adopted," and thus speaking, he rang the bell.

The lady's-maid immediately answered the summons.

"Tell Brockman and John," said the marquis, "that they are to make instantaneous preparations to start off on a journey. A post-chaise and four must be ordered at once. And having delivered this message, bring me writing materials." Then, as soon as the maid had quitted the room, he turned again toward Ernestina, saying, "I will send two of my domestics, so that when they reach France, one may take one route and one another, in case Algernon should be returning home, and thus there will be little chance of missing him. I will write two letters also, that each may be the bearer of one."

In a few minutes the maid reappeared with the writing materials, and the Marquis of Leveson, sitting down at the table, penned the following letter:

"ALGERNON: — Your sister Ernestina is very, very ill, and she conjures you to lose not a moment in coming straight to Albemarle Street to see her. Whatever occupations you may have in hand must be immediately abandoned, nor must you pause on the road for any purpose whatsoever. Travel day and night, I beseech you, or you may not behold Ernestina alive.

"Your uncle,

"LEVESON.

"To the Lord Algernon Cavendish."

The marquis made a duplicate copy of this letter, and having sealed them both, directed them, not with the name of Lord Algernon Cavendish, but by the assumed one which his nephew had taken. By the time the despatches were thus prepared, the lady's-maid returned again with the intimation that Brockman and John were in readiness, and the marquis descended to the hall to give them the requisite instructions and also the funds for their journey. The post-chaise and four was in waiting, and soon after ten o'clock did the messengers take their departure.

Lord Leveson now ascended once more to his niece's chamber, whither the nurse had returned during his temporary absence; but again he dismissed both this woman and the maid for a little while, telling them he would sit for another half-hour with Lady Ernestina. Accordingly, when again alone with his niece, he said all he could think of to tranquillize her mind and cheer her spirits. Thus did the half-hour elapse, and he was about to bid her good night and summon her attendants, when the door was gently opened, and as the nobleman looked to see who was entering, he gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of mingled rage and horror on beholding the hideous countenance of the Hangman.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CATASTROPHE

That ejaculation was immediately comprehended by Lady Ernestina Dysart, and suddenly starting up into a sitting posture in the couch, she gazed with wild, staring eyes upon the advancing form of her deadliest enemy. Then slowly sinking back on the pillow, she groaned in agony of spirit.

"Monster! what do you here?" demanded Lord Leveson, confronting the public executioner, who had not at first observed the nobleman in the shade of the curtain.

"Ah! is it your lordship?" said Daniel Coffin, coolly. "You and me are old friends."

"Friends!" echoed the marquis, becoming purple with indignation, "how dare you address me in such terms? But this is not the place for dispute. Come with me."

"Not till I have said a word to her ladyship," responded the Hangman, with brutal gruffness.

"Do, for Heaven's sake, I implore you, come," said the marquis. "You know that I hesitate not to pay liberally. Come, I say."

"Well, that's an inducement, at all events," observed Coffin. "Lead the way. But one word," he added, clutching the marquis forcibly with his rough, grimy hand, "don't think of making any exposure or kicking up a row, for if you do, I on my part will let out such things as shall make the whole world ring."

"Enough, spare your threats," interrupted the marquis, in a strange, deep tone. "Whatever takes place between us shall be strictly quiet and secret. Come."

Then hastening to open the door, Lord Leveson looked out into the passage, to assure himself that the coast was

clear, and finding that it was so, he led the way to the Crimson Drawing-room, where he knew lights to be burning.

"Will you remain here for a few moments," he asked, "while I go and send the attendants up to my niece? They will not return to her until they hear the bell ring, or else receive orders to the same effect."

"And what guarantee have I," demanded the Hangman, "that you won't come back to me with two or three constables at your heels?"

"The same guarantee which prevents me from ringing the bell now and summoning assistance," and as the marquis thus spoke, he looked firmly in the Hangman's face.

"True," said Daniel Coffin. "And besides, you dare not provoke exposure, for a variety of reasons. Go, then, but be not long absent. One moment, however," he added, as a thought struck him. "What if any of your tall flunkys should happen to come in here during your absence? They might think it rather odd to find a genelman like me in the place, and not believing my word that you and I are old friends and have got private business together, they might unceremoniously drag me out into the street and lug me off to the watch-house. Now, this is a chance I should like to avoid."

"Well," said the marquis, after a few moments' consideration, "take one of the candles and step in here. You have been there before," he added, with bitter irony, "and I need scarcely assure you that my domestics are not in the habit of intruding into that part of the house."

Thus speaking, the marquis unlocked the door leading into the suite of private apartments, and Daniel Coffin, taking up one of the wax lights, proceeded into the adjacent room. Lord Leveson closed the door upon him, and as he did so a sudden expression of malignant triumph appeared upon the nobleman's features, as he muttered between his false teeth, "Nothing could be better. It aids the execution of the resolve which I have adopted."

He then quitted the Crimson Drawing-room and hastened to send the nurse up to his niece. Having done this, he sped to his own bedchamber, and taking from a cupboard a case of pistols, ascertained that they were loaded. As he put in fresh priming, he said to himself, "All this must have an end. It is impossible to tolerate the persecutions of that monster

any longer. His extortions and intrusions are beyond all bearing, and the oftener I yield, the greater will his exactions become. I will shoot him like any dog. The circumstance that he has stolen into my house, unperceived by any one, will be corroborated by the servants, and the explanation of the tragedy will, therefore, be easy enough. What is it, after all? I find a robber on the premises, and I shoot him. No one will think of inquiring how I came to have pistols so handy, and if the question be asked, an excuse is easily devised. Oh, wretch, wretch! your hour is now come, and I will avenge my dying niece. But I must lose no time."

While these reflections passed hurriedly through Lord Leveson's brain, he concealed the pistols, which were small and of elegant workmanship, about his person, and retraced his way to the Crimson Drawing-room. Thence he proceeded into the adjacent apartment, where the Hangman was lounging negligently upon one of the splendid sofas, with his dusty boots on the velvet cushion.

"Now," said the nobleman, "what do you require? What do you demand of me?" and as he thus spoke, he placed himself in such a position as to be near enough to take sure aim of the Hangman without affording him the chance of springing up and dashing the pistol out of his hand the moment it should be drawn forth.

"I suppose your lordship knows," responded Coffin, raising himself to a sitting posture, "that I entertain a dreadful vengeance against your niece, Lady Ernestina, for I dare say she has told you everything?"

"Yes, everything," replied the marquis, his countenance ashy pale, but still with an expression of desperate firmness. "The atrocious outrage you committed upon her —"

"Outrage, indeed!" echoed the Hangman, contemptuously, as well as with ferocity in his looks; "but do you know, my lord, the different outrages this precious niece of yours has attempted against me, first plotting to stick a dagger into me at Westminster Bridge, then thrusting me into one of your queer chairs with the intention of leaving me to die of starvation?"

"Wretch!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, and drawing forth one of the pistols with marvellous rapidity, he at once levelled it point-blank at the Hangman's head.

But it flashed in the pan, and quick as the eye could wink, or like a tiger darting upon its prey, Daniel Coffin sprang with a ferocious growl at the marquis, hurled him upon the carpet, put one hand over his mouth to prevent him from crying out, and with the other tore from his person the second pistol with which the nobleman was provided.

"You accursed old scoundrel!" said the Hangman, in a terrible voice, "what's to prevent me from blowing out your brains? But no," he immediately ejaculated, as a thought struck him, and his eyes flashed with malignant fires. "I will punish you in another way. Come, get up. But, by Satan! if you dare to cry out or approach the bell-ropes, I'll shoot you through the head with your own weapon."

The public executioner made the wretched marquis rise from the floor, and seizing him by the collar of his coat, he pushed him into the next room. There he hurled him at once and with terrible violence into the nearest mechanical chair. The sharp click was heard, the machinery performed its work, and the Marquis of Leveson was in a moment a captive in one of the engines which had so often favoured his lustful designs against virgin innocence.

For nearly a minute the nobleman was so overcome by terror, consternation, and dismay that he could not give utterance to a word. All that had just passed so hurriedly seemed to be a phase in a hideous dream, but as his ideas began to collect themselves, he raised his looks in a beseeching manner toward Daniel Coffin. There was little light in the room, for the candle had been left burning in the adjacent one, and its beams shed but a faint lustre through the open doorway. In that uncertain light the Hangman's features appeared horrible indeed, with the expression of devilish malignity and glowering triumph that was upon them; so that when the unhappy marquis raised his eyes to that repulsive countenance, he beheld nought encouraging in the looks which met his own. Nevertheless, so utterly desperate was his position that he was ready to catch at any straw of hope, and in a supplicating voice he said, "Coffin, you indeed have reason to be angry with me, but let us come to terms."

"Terms, indeed!" echoed the Hangman, with a savage growl. "What terms can I come to with a treacherous old villain like you? It would be a pity, however, to leave anything valuable about your person."

Thus speaking, the ruffian proceeded to rifle the pockets of the miserable marquis of all they contained. He took from the nobleman his watch and chain, the diamond pin from his shirt-frill, the rings from his fingers, his purse and a roll of bank-notes from his pocket.

"A thousand guineas if you let me go," said the marquis, awfully terrified.

"No, not if you offered me ten thousand, or twenty thousand," replied the Hangman, "because I should know very well that you have only got some cursed treachery in view."

"On my soul and honour, as a noble and as a gentleman, I will keep faith with you," urged the marquis, imploringly.

"I can't believe it," rejoined Daniel Coffin, with brutal gruffness. "Things have gone too far betwixt you and me for us to have any more faith in each other. In fact, you must have been very desperate, and felt that matters had come to a crisis, when you made up your mind to shoot me. But let me tell you, my lord, that my vengeance is not half-finished yet. I mean to make the house too hot to hold you," added the villain, with a savage leer of fearful significancy.

He then turned abruptly away, fetched the wax candle from the adjoining room, and as he held it in his hand, stopped in front of the now horror-stricken marquis, saying, in a terrible voice, "I mean by one bold stroke to put an end to you and your vile niece at once. By so doing I shall punish you both for all you have tried to do against me, and I shall at the same time relieve myself from any chance of being troubled by you in future. I know pretty well that if you noblemen make up your minds to ruin a poor devil like me, you won't hesitate at the means, and, as I just now said, your lordship evidently feels that things have come to such a crisis that, no matter at what risk to yourself, you must get rid of me. So here goes!"

With these words the Hangman, who had lashed himself up like any maddened tiger to a frenzy of rage, hurried on into the gallery containing all the specimens of art which the prurient imagination of Lord Leveson had at different times congregated there. The nobleman, fearfully alive to the full meaning of the miscreant's threats, called after him, in an agonizing voice of the most piteous entreaty, to relent, to come back, and to enter into amicable terms with him.

But Daniel Coffin was deaf to all appeals, and rushing on into the gallery, he set fire to the draperies in every part.

Then, speeding back again, and heedless of the cries of the miserable marquis, he traversed the suite of apartments, locked the door leading into the Crimson Drawing-room, issued thence, ascended the stairs without meeting a soul, gained the attics, and passed forth to the roof of the house. Reaching the empty dwelling a little higher up the street, he descended the dark and deserted stairs of that house, and let himself out through the area. Hurrying on to that extremity of the street which was farthest from Piccadilly, he there halted to observe the result of his atrocious proceeding. Nor did he wait long. In a very few minutes cries of " Fire " met his ears, a lurid light sprang up above Leveson House, and almost immediately afterward the flames were seen gushing forth from the roof.

The Hangman, not choosing to be observed loitering about near the scene of his crime and his venegance, hurried away, chuckling horribly to himself and gloating over the deed which he had accomplished.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon of the following day when a post-chaise and four, on its way to London, dashed up to the door of the Green Man tavern at Blackheath, to change horses.

There was one person inside, a young gentleman of exceedingly handsome countenance, slender figure, and elegant appearance, and two domestics rode upon the box behind. One of these servants, who seemed the superior of the two, and was in plain clothes, the other being in livery, leaped down the moment the chaise stopped, and urged the hostlers to use all possible despatch in changing the horses.

" You seem to be in a hurry? " said the landlord, who had come out to superintend the process, and perhaps with a hope that the traveller might need some refreshment.

" Yes," answered the domestic. " It is Lord Algernon Cavendish who is hastening to town to see his sister, Lady Ernestina Dysart, who is dying."

" Surely, then," said the landlord, " they belong to the Leveson family, don't they? "

Brockman, for he it was, answered in the affirmative.

" Perhaps, then, you don't know what has happened? "

said the landlord, with the air of a man who had some disagreeable tidings to impart.

"Know what?" demanded Brockman, in amazement.

"I am sorry to say," was the rejoinder, "that I have got very bad news to tell."

"Bad news? Speak, what do you mean?"

"I mean, unfortunately, that Leveson House was burned down last night."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Brockman. "But were any lives lost?"

"It is feared so," answered the landlord. "But I heard no particulars. There are a few lines in this morning's paper about it, but very little, indeed, and no details. The guard of one of the London and Dover coaches told me this morning, as he passed on his way down, that there was a rumour up at the West End that the marquis himself, a lady, and two or three of the servants had been burned to death, but he wasn't sure."

Brockman waited to hear no more, even if the landlord had anything further to say, but hastening up to the carriage window, the valet communicated to Lord Algernon Cavendish the intelligence he had just received.

"Oh, my poor sister!" exclaimed the young nobleman, clasping his hands in despair. "For God's sake, tell the hostlers to make haste. Lavish gold, Brockman, upon the postilions. Suspense is intolerable."

"All ready!" at this moment exclaimed the landlord.

Brockman hastened to give some instructions to the postilions, promising them liberal rewards if they sped like the wind, and then having mounted to his seat upon the box, he exclaimed, "All right!" and away dashed the equipage toward the metropolis.

It would be difficult to describe the agonies of suspense which Lord Algernon Cavendish experienced during the three-quarters of an hour which elapsed until the vehicle reached the corner of Albemarle Street. But in the meantime we will avail ourselves of the opportunity to state incidentally that Brockman and John, while waiting on the pier at Dover for the sailing of the vessel which they had hired to convey them across to France, were agreeably surprised on beholding Lord Algernon Cavendish land from a sailing-packet that arrived at the time from Calais. On

hearing the object of their mission and receiving his uncle's notes, which they put into his hands, he, as a matter of course, had at once agreed to accompany them post-haste to London; but while stopping for a few minutes at Canterbury to change horses, he had seized the opportunity to pen a few brief lines to some one in the neighbourhood. This note he gave to one of the hotel servants, together with a liberal fee, so that it might be conveyed at once to the place of its address; and then, the chaise being ready to start again, he had at once pursued his hurried journey. But alas! we have just seen what sad tidings awaited him at Blackheath, and now they were to be fearfully realized when the post-chaise entered Albemarle Street.

Leveson House had ceased to exist. Nought but a blackened ruin remained, the scathed and blasted skeleton of former pomp, magnificence, and grandeur. A crowd was collected in front of the burned edifice, for the awful catastrophe had throughout the day attracted hundreds of persons at different times to the spot. Leaping forth from the vehicle, Algernon at once received from the nearest bystanders a terrible confirmation of the rumours that had reached him at Blackheath relative to the fate of his uncle, his sister, and some of the servants.

It appeared that so terrible was the conflagration that it burst forth all in a moment, as if the house had been fired in several parts. All was in an instant confusion and dismay. Some of the domestics had rushed out into the street, without pausing to care for any others of the inmates, but some had hastened up-stairs to rescue Lady Ernestina. The flames, however, forced them back, for the house, having an immense quantity of woodwork about it, burned like tinder. All endeavours, therefore, to save Lady Ernestina Dysart were in vain, and equally futile was the hurried search made for the marquis himself. But suddenly, as Lord Algernon's informant went on to relate, a large portion of the building gave way, and much of the interior was for a few brief instants exposed to the view of the crowd gathered in the street. Then was it that, to the horror of all the spectators, the Marquis of Leveson was seen writhing in a chair to which he appeared to be held fast by some unaccountable means. At all events, sure enough was it that the wretched nobleman was thus observed for that brief

interval of a few instants struggling and battling with convulsive desperation in the armchair whence it was but too evident he could not extricate himself. The flames were pouring like a torrent around him. In another instant he was utterly enveloped therein, and his appalling cries reached the ears of the horror-stricken spectators. Then another portion of the building gave way, a huge column of fire shot up as if a volcano had suddenly burst forth beneath the very foundations of the mansion, and no more was seen or heard of the wretched marquis. Finally, it appeared that when a muster subsequently took place of all who had succeeded in escaping from the conflagration, Lord Leveson, Lady Ernestina, the nurse, the lady's-maid, and the old housekeeper were missing. The fire had continued to burn for some hours afterward, and now, amidst the charred and blackened remains, it was impossible to discover the slightest trace of those human beings who had fallen victims to its fury.

The origin of the conflagration appeared to be enveloped in the deepest mystery. It was impossible to account for so sudden and furious an outburst of the desolating element, and the utter ruin which had been caused prevented the possibility of discovering the source of the disaster. The prevailing opinion, however, was that it had arisen from an accident; and in his den in Fleet Lane did the Hangman still gloat over the idea of the vengeance he had consummated and the wreck he had caused.

Lord Algernon Cavendish, who by this catastrophe had become Marquis of Leveson and the sudden possessor of enormous wealth, was overpowered with grief at the terrific fate of his sister.

Oh, to have been in time to see her ere she thus perished miserably, to have learned from her lips that she was penitent for the past, and that she deplored the errors into which her strong passions had led her, this would have been a solace to the generous-hearted young nobleman. Little recked he for the nobler title, the more exalted rank, and the vastly superior riches which he thus inherited. His soul was stricken with grief to think that his uncle and his sister should have died in so shocking a manner.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOUISA'S LOVER

Several days had elapsed since the occurrences took place at Canterbury which have been recorded in previous chapters, and Lady Sackville was still an inmate of the cottage. She had received letters alike from her husband and her half-brother Valentine; she had also received answers to the epistles she had addressed to Miss Bathurst and the prince regent. As least important, we will speak of the latter ones first.

Miss Bathurst had written kindly, but still in the strain of a thorough woman of the world. She expressed herself perfectly satisfied with the manner in which Lady Sackville had fulfilled the terms of her agreement in all respects. She admitted that neither she nor Mrs. Fitzherbert had any further request to make at the hands of royalty, and therefore they required not Lady Sackville's services any more. Accordingly, so far as Miss Bathurst was concerned personally, she had no objection to offer to Venetia's retirement from the court circle; but she bade her " dear young friend," as she called her, reflect maturely ere she voluntarily gave up a position which, once abdicated, could never be regained. Venetia — for Clara Stanley still preserved this Christian name, it being the one which figured in the peerage, and which she therefore could not give up — was in no way moved from her settled purpose by Miss Bathurst's reasoning, and Louisa, to whom she showed the letter, was overjoyed to find her sister so resolute in the step which was for ever to remove her from the sphere of temptations.

The prince regent's letter was full of mingled entreaties and reproaches. He was, after his own fashion, much attached to Venetia, but his love, if such it may be termed,

was entirely of a sensual character. Although during his connection with her he had indulged in other intrigues, as, for instance, with Penelope Arbuthnot, Lady Ernestina, and Mrs. Malpas, yet he was very far from being sated with Venetia's charms; and, moreover, all prince though he were, he was not a little proud of possessing as a mistress the most splendid creature that ever had appeared at the English court, — perhaps, indeed, the handsomest woman that England had ever produced. He therefore wrote in an impassioned style to Venetia, imploring her to return, reminding her of all the benefits he had showered upon herself, her husband, and the numerous persons for whom at any time she had solicited his favours, and promising to bestow a dukedom upon Horace, so that she might become a duchess, if she would retrace her steps to Carlton House. He even declared that if she refused he should be inclined to come after her, in defiance of public opinion, and he enjoined her, in any case, to answer his letter by return of post. Venetia did answer it, but only to reiterate her former resolution. She renewed the expressions of her gratitude for the royal bounties which herself, her husband, and her friends had received, but she emphatically declared that not only was her own happiness, but likewise that of others who were very dear to her, dependent on the resolve she had taken. She besought his Royal Highness not to commit any folly by coming after her, as such a step could only lead to a painful scene, without any beneficial result. This letter she likewise showed to Louisa, and the charming girl was still more rejoiced by that additional proof of her sister's fixity of purpose.

Sir Valentine Malvern stated in his letter that in a very long interview with Lord Sackville he had represented everything that Venetia wished him to say to her husband, and that Horace had stated but few scruples and raised but very slight objections in respect to the abandonment of a court life. Sir Valentine sincerely congratulated his half-sister upon the satisfactory result of that interview, and concluded by stating that when married to Florence Eaton he would pay both his half-sisters a visit, wherever they might be at the time, in company with his bride.

The letter of Horace Sackville was just what Venetia had expected. Her husband commenced by declaring how re-

joiced he was to find a marriage relation in so excellent, amiable, and generous-hearted a young man as Valentine Malvern. He went on to say that he could without much regret abandon his high position at court, and devote himself thenceforth to the cultivation of domestic bliss in the society of Venetia. He declared that, for his part, he would strive to his utmost to fling a veil over all that was past, so that no unpleasant memories should interfere to mar their future happiness. He emphatically promised that never would he make Venetia's bygone frailties a subject of reproach to her, inasmuch as he himself was a willing accomplice in what had occurred, and had profited thereby. He dwelt at considerable length upon those scenes of tenderness, contrition, and remorse which had episodically marked their career of brilliant dissipation, and to which Venetia herself had touchingly alluded in her letters. He said even at the time when those scenes occurred he had experienced a sort of presentiment that they were harbingers of future reformation, and he instanced them as proofs that however warped the good principles of the heart might become by external influences and surrounding circumstances, yet that no heart could be wholly lost when it was accessible to the better feelings of human nature. In a postscript he added that Valentine Malvern had behaved toward him with the utmost liberality, having advanced him twenty thousand pounds to settle all his liabilities and enable him to quit his post with honour and credit to himself; and he concluded by observing that so soon as these debts were liquidated and the business of his department as lord steward of the prince regent's household could be properly wound up, which would be in the course of a few days, he would repair to Canterbury to rejoin his wife and to be presented to her sister and aunt.

Altogether Lord Sackville's letter was one that gave sincere pleasure to Venetia, and likewise to the gentle Louisa, making the latter think much better of her noble brother-in-law than even Venetia's representations had previously done. Nor less was Miss Stanley herself well pleased with the correspondence of Lord Sackville and Sir Valentine Malvern, and most affectionately did she embrace her elder niece when she found her so determined in rejecting the advice of Miss Bathurst and remaining firm against the entreaties of the prince regent.

It was in the middle of the day following that on which these letters were received that a note, addressed to Louisa, was delivered at the cottage. She instantaneously recognized the handwriting of her lover, and, with fluttering heart, tore it open. Its contents were these:

"FOUNTAIN HOTEL, CANTERBURY, One o'clock.

"I have but a moment, my ever beloved Louisa, to inform you that I am arrived safe from the Continent. Oh, you cannot imagine, my angel, with what affliction it is that I am compelled to pass through Canterbury without being able even to speed to your home and fold you in my arms. But urgent matters compel me to hasten on, without delay, to London. When you learn the cause you will not reproach me.

"I know that you have too much confidence in my love and affection to fancy for an instant that aught save the most imperious circumstances could prevent me from coming first to you, on my arrival in England after this long, long absence. But in two or three days you will be certain to see me, and then, my ever loved Louisa, we shall meet to part no more. Then also will I give you explanations relative to many things which for certain reasons I have hitherto kept concealed from you.

"Your ever affectionate and devoted

"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

The young maiden wept as she perused this note, but they were tears of joy which trickled down her lovely cheeks. For Jocelyn was come back, he had arrived safe in England at last, and her love was of too holy and too confiding a character to permit her for an instant to imagine that he had devised any false pretext for not coming at once to see her. In a few days he would be there, and oh, then what happiness would await her!

Miss Stanley and Venetia sincerely congratulated Louisa upon Jocelyn's return, and when they read that part of the note which alluded to certain explanations which he meant to give her, they exchanged a quick smile of intelligence, for Venetia had privately confided to her aunt who Jocelyn Loftus really was, and that worthy relative was full well convinced of the unimpeachable integrity, the high character,

and the chivalrous nature of him who was shortly to wed the beauteous Louisa.

On the second morning after the receipt of this letter another one came from Jocelyn. It was a mourning one, with deep black edges, and with a black seal, but this seal was stamped with aristocratic armorial bearings, surmounted by a peer's coronet. Its contents ran as follows:

"I write a few lines, my dearest Louisa, to say that you may expect me to-morrow. You will perceive by my mourning letter that I have experienced a severe family loss. Such is indeed the case, and this may partially explain to you the circumstances which compelled me in such a hurried manner to pass through Canterbury and repair to London on my arrival in England. I have called at Carlton House, have seen Lord Sackville, and have learned from him that you know all relative to your sister, and that she is now with you. Oh, tell her, dearest Louisa, that it was with the most unfeigned rejoicing I heard from her husband's lips her resolve to abandon a court life, and equally pleased am I to hear that Lord Sackville himself is firm in the same intention. He and I have shaken hands as men whom marriage will soon place in the light of brothers, and you must tell your sister that she also is to welcome me as a brother when I come to-morrow. Nor less has it been with the purest delight that I have heard of the happy restoration of your excellent aunt to a comparatively perfect state of health. Present my sincerest regards to her.

"I learn from Lord Sackville that your sister has not as yet revealed to you the secret who I am, but that she has left all explanations on that head to be given by me. Be it so. Present circumstances — circumstances which have indeed greatly changed by the deaths that have plunged me into mourning — have induced me to resume my legitimate standing in society, and this much I will tell you now, dearest Louisa, that the only joy I experience in the possession of rank and wealth is because I can make you, beloved girl, the sharer of both. But all this will be revealed to-morrow.

"I shall leave London at such an hour so as to be in Canterbury at three o'clock punctually. At that hour I shall alight at the Fountain Hotel. Perhaps, if you and your

sister should be inclined for a walk about that time, you might meet me there, as you may be well assured that I shall count every moment as an intolerable delay until I once more fold you in my arms.

"For the last time, dearest Louisa, do I sign myself by the name of

"JOCELYN."

"He will be here to-day!" exclaimed the overjoyed Louisa, her angelic countenance radiant with delight, and oh, how truly beautiful did the amiable girl appear at this moment. But the next instant a shade of sadness passed over her countenance, and tears began to trickle down her cheeks as she murmured, with tremulous voice, "Poor Jocelyn! he has evidently lost those who were dear to him. He speaks of deaths in his family; it is therefore more than one who has died," and she wept for his sake.

But Venetia and Miss Stanley understood full well who they were that had thus died, although they were as yet utterly ignorant of the way of their deaths. But not only did that seal with the armorial bearings indicate who one was that had thus died, but knowing also who was the other nearest relative that Jocelyn had, they had no difficulty in conjecturing for whose loss he was the most deeply grieved. Louisa was too little acquainted with aristocratic usages and noble emblems to gather any clue of her lover's real rank from that heraldic seal, nor indeed was her gentle heart much moved by the prospect of wealth and rank to which he alluded in his letter. It was sufficient for her happiness that her lover was coming to meet her again that day, and that he wrote in a style which assured her of his constant affection. Nor will the reader blame her if, soon wiping away her tears, she abandoned herself to the delicious thoughts which it was natural she should experience at the certainty of beholding him in a few hours, and again did she receive the warmest congratulations from her aunt and sister.

It was an immense relief to the mind of Lady Sackville to learn that Louisa's lover was prepared to overlook all the past so far as she was concerned, and that with the natural generosity of his soul he had conveyed so delicate and soothing an intimation that their meeting would be of the most friendly and cordial nature. And now does the reader ask

whether, as three o'clock of that afternoon approached, there were any persons wending their way toward the Fountain Hotel, to be there in readiness to meet the expected one? Yes, the two sisters were threading the Dane John in that direction, and fain would Miss Stanley have accompanied them but that she feared to walk too far in her still enervated condition. But Lady Sackville and Louisa did repair to the hotel, and as her ladyship was already known there, her equipage and servants being all this while at that establishment, she and her sister were at once received with the utmost respect. They were conducted to a private sitting-room, and Lady Sackville whispered to one of her own domestics a few words stating for whom she and her sister were now waiting.

Half an hour passed, and soon after the clocks of the old cathedral and the numerous other churches of Canterbury had struck three, the sounds of an equipage dashing up the narrow street in which the Fountain Hotel is situated called forth all the dependents of the establishment. A splendid travelling-carriage, with armorial blazonry upon the panels, and drawn by four post-horses, whirled up to the hotel and passed in through the gateway.

The apartment in which Lady Sackville and Louisa were awaiting the expected one's coming commanded from its windows a view of the courtyard into which the equipage had rolled, and when they beheld him whom they expected alight, Louisa felt the faintness of excessive joy come over her.

"Compose yourself, my sweet sister," said Lady Sackville. "Oh, how delighted I am that this cup of happiness is so filled up to the brim for you."

Louisa could not give utterance to a word, but throwing herself into her sister's arms, she wept for joy on her bosom. And now hurried footsteps were heard approaching along the passage, and the next moment one of the hotel waiters threw open the door, and with officious importance, announced, in a loud tone, "The Marquis of Leveson."

A faint shriek escaped Louisa's lips as this name struck upon her ears, but the next instant she beheld the object of her best and purest affections, and springing toward each other, they were clasped in a fond embrace.

Again and again did the young marquis, for such indeed

was Jocelyn Loftus, strain the damsel to his heart, and she, weeping and smiling, glorious in her beauty and in her rapturous feelings as an April morning that is all sunshine and showers, gave back the fond caresses. Lady Sackville wept for joy at the sight, and if anything were now required to rivet the firmness of her resolve to trust only henceforth for happiness in sweet domestic bliss, it was the spectacle of the ineffable delight, so pure, so chaste, and holy, too, that was now experienced by this fond couple.

When the first full flood of joy had somewhat found its vent, the Marquis of Leveson turned toward Lady Sackville, and, taking her hand, he kissed her forehead, saying, " Dear sister, for such you will shortly become to me, I am truly delighted to meet you here."

" And never henceforth, Algernon," answered Lady Sackville, in a low and hurried voice, a voice that was tremulous, too, with profound emotion, " shall you have to blush to acknowledge me in any way as a friend or as a relative."

The young marquis pressed her hand in token that he received the assurance as an evidence of her contrition and her good faith, and that he put confidence in it. Then again turning toward his Louisa, he made her sit down by him on the sofa, and taking her hand, which he retained in his own, he said, " Beloved one, the officious zeal which the servant ere now manifested in announcing my name so suddenly — a little incident which in my haste to fold you in my arms I did not foresee, not, indeed, thinking that he had time to learn from my own domestics who I was — elicited an ejaculation of dismay from your lips. Yes, dearest Louisa, that name which he announced so abruptly is indeed the one which I now bear; and, as I declared in my letter, if there were ever a moment when I felt that I had reason to rejoice in that lofty rank which I possess, it is now, my angel, that I can ask you to become the sharer of it. I know full well that for a mind so pure, so ingenuous, and so artless as yours the splendours of rank have no dazzling brilliancy and the possession of illimitable wealth no factitious allurements; but still, constituted as society is, and considering the honour which the world shows to persons occupying an elevated position, it cannot be held as a misfortune that I am enabled to place a coronet upon this fair brow of thine, and to bear you away in due course to splendid mansions

situated in the midst of vast estates, and bid you regard them all as your own."

Louisa, still weeping and smiling, threw her arms about her lover's neck, and kissed him fondly in token of gratitude for the language which he thus held toward her. And, oh, whatever painful adventures the maiden might have passed through, whatever sorrowful reflections she might at any time have known, whatever misgivings for a season she might have entertained through the treachery of the late Marquis of Leveson in respect to her lover's fidelity, how immeasurable beyond compare was the recompense which she now received.

For a little space a shade of sadness was thrown over the scene, when the young marquis related the catastrophe which had deprived him of his sister Ernestina, that same catastrophe in which his uncle's life had also terminated so miserably. Forgotten then was any ill which for a time the generous-hearted Louisa had sustained at the hands of either the late marquis or of the perished Ernestina, and the tears ran down her cheeks as she listened to the sad tale which her lover recited.

But we will not dwell upon this, for it would be a ridiculous affectation to pretend that the late tragedy could materially mar the happiness which the lovers experienced at being thus reunited, — reunited, also, under circumstances so auspicious as to portend no more parting.

Let us follow the young Marquis of Leveson as, with Venetia on one arm and Louisa on the other, he repaired to that cottage where in times past he had first learned to esteem the amiable qualities of his intended bride, and in learning to esteem her had learned to love her. Let us suppose the cottage reached, and Miss Stanley appearing at the garden gate to give the most cordial welcome to the Marquis of Leveson; and then, while the happy party are sitting down to the dinner which Mary, the servant maid, had prepared in her very best style, and which the aunt in good sooth had specially superintended, let us devote the following chapter to certain explanations relative to him who throughout so large a portion of our narrative has figured as Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER XXV

THE YOUNG NOBLEMAN

Lord Algernon Cavendish (now the Marquis of Leveson) and Lady Ernestina Cavendish (afterward the wife of Mr. Dysart) were the only children of Lord Jocelyn Loftus Cavendish, younger brother of the late Marquis of Leveson who perished in the fire. Their parents had died early, leaving them but indifferently provided for. A country-seat in the north of England, and a small estate producing a bare six hundred a year, devoted to Algernon, while a few thousand pounds in the funds were the whole fortune of Ernestina. Algernon was educated at Eton, and subsequently passed three years at Cambridge, not with the view of entering the Church, but for the purpose of finishing his studies. There he acquitted himself well, and was known as a young man of excellent disposition, great steadiness of habits, and of the most upright principles. His sister Ernestina was placed at a fashionable boarding-school at Kensington. We have said, in one of the earlier chapters of this history, that from her childhood she was a special favourite with her uncle the Marquis of Leveson, who regularly sent for her from school every Saturday to pass the interval with him till the Monday morning. But what with the shallow kind of tutelage she experienced at the fashionable seminary and the utter unfitness of such a confirmed voluptuary as the marquis to be her guardian, the young lady was not reared in a manner at all calculated to settle her mind upon the foundation of sterling moral principle, or to curb those passions which she naturally possessed.

During a dangerous illness which the Marquis of Leveson experienced, Ernestina, grateful for his kindness toward her, nursed him with the utmost attention, and this circum-

stance riveted the attachment which the nobleman felt for his niece. On leaving school she became altogether an inmate of Leveson House, where her brother Algernon was likewise at the time passing a few weeks. But Algernon had not been accustomed to spend his holidays, when at Eton or the University, with his uncle. The young man, from the samples of the British aristocracy he met with at the public seminaries, had conceived no very great affection for the order to which he belonged, and having an uncle (by his late mother's side) dwelling in a distant county and entirely devoted to agricultural pursuits, Algernon had always preferred spending the vacations with him. This relative, however, died just before Algernon quitted Cambridge for good, and thus was it that he went to pass some little time at Leveson House. While there he could not help obtaining some insight into the real character of his uncle. Though himself of the steadiest habits, he was still experienced enough in the ways of the world — particularly after passing through the fiery ordeal of a college life — to perceive that his uncle was a confirmed voluptuary of the most unprincipled description, and a circumstance which soon after occurred made him look with loathing and horror upon his noble relative's character.

The incident we refer to was this. One day Algernon was reading in the Crimson Drawing-room, when he heard sounds resembling female shrieks that either appeared to be stifling, as if with a gag placed upon the lips, or else were penetrating through very thick walls which well-nigh deadened them. They continued, and the idea struck Algernon forcibly that they came from one of the inner rooms of the mansion. He had observed that the suite of apartments communicating from the Crimson Drawing-room were always shut up, but until this moment he had never paid much attention to the circumstance. Now, however, the mystery that was evidently connected with those rooms instantaneously associated itself in his mind with the screams which, though so faintly, were still reaching his ears. All the natural generosity and chivalrous enterprise of his nature were suddenly awakened by the thought that some female was enduring ill-treatment in those apartments. He flew to the door communicating therewith. By a most unusual oversight that door had been left unlocked. He opened it, and the screams,

emanating from an inner room, now sounded loud and piercing. Rushing onward, Algernon penetrated into the adjacent apartment, and there did an astounding spectacle meet his eyes. A lovely young creature, imprisoned in one of the mechanical chairs, was giving vent to her anguish, while the Marquis of Leveson, in the maddened fury of his excited passions, was literally stripping her garments off her. Her dress was all torn open, her bosom was bare, and the nobleman, regardless of her anguished shame, was gloating upon her charms previous to making himself the master of them. The unexpected presence of Algernon filled the intended victim with hope, but inspired the marquis with the rage of disappointment. He imperiously commanded Algernon to withdraw, covering him with reproaches for an intrusion which he attributed to the basest sentiment of curiosity. But the young man would not obey his incensed uncle, and taking up a shawl from the carpet, he threw it over the shoulders of the young female, insisting that she should be immediately released from the bondage of the chair. The marquis dared not refuse compliance with his nephew's demand. The girl was accordingly liberated, and a handsome sum of money was given by the unprincipled voluptuary to hush up the affair with her parents.

The reader may easily suppose that Algernon was not likely to remain another hour beneath his uncle's roof, and he insisted upon taking Ernestina away with him. The marquis, in tones of the most abject entreaty, besought Algernon not to expose him to the world, nor even hint at anything of a disparaging nature to his character in Ernestina's presence. Algernon readily promised compliance with these requests, — in the first place, because it was contrary to the natural generosity of his disposition to inflict an injury, and in the second place, because he was careful not to say anything that might shock the purity of his sister's mind. It was therefore agreed that Ernestina should be placed in the care of some distant female relatives, who resided a little way out of London, and for this proceeding some excuse was devised. Algernon, having seen his sister safe in her new home, set out upon a journey to the Highlands of Scotland, the sublime and striking scenery of which he had for some time been anxious to visit.

After an absence of about a year, Algernon returned to

London, expecting to find Ernestina still with her female relatives, from whose dwelling the letters he had received during the interval had been dated. But, to his surprise and annoyance, he found that since he last heard from her, a few weeks previous to his return, she had grown so weary of the monotonous and quiet life which her relations led that she had gone back of her own accord to Leveson House, where the marquis, who really entertained a great affection for her and had much missed her society, cheerfully received her. Whilst staying with those female relatives, she had fallen in with Mr. Dysart, who, though so much older than herself, had managed to win her affections. On her brother's return to London, finding that he much disapproved of her having gone back to Leveson House, and impatient of the control which she fancied he sought to exercise over her, she at once yielded to Mr. Dysart's solicitations and married him. The match was most unpalatable both to her uncle and her brother, and the former vowed that he never would speak to Paul Dysart, much less receive him inside his door, as long as he lived. Algernon, though likewise disapproving of the alliance, because he had a bad opinion of Dysart's character, nevertheless visited the newly married pair at their residence at Blackheath, but soon afterward he quitted London on a fresh excursion, and made a tour of Wales.

On his return to the capital, he repaired to Blackheath to visit his sister. Entering the grounds of the villa, he heard Ernestina's voice issuing from an arbour densely embowered in surrounding trees. Thinking that she was with her husband, he at once approached the spot, and, to his mingled astonishment and dismay, beheld her in the arms of an individual who was entirely unknown to him. This was Sir Archibald Malvern. Algernon, in his resentment, was about to inflict summary chastisement upon the seducer of his sister, but Ernestina, falling upon her knees, besought him to forbear from a proceeding that would inevitably create a disturbance and lead to exposure. The young nobleman accordingly subdued his angry feelings, but peremptorily ordered Sir Archibald to quit the premises at once. He then sat down with his sister, and in anguish of heart remonstrated with her upon her guilt, which it was impossible for her to deny. But now that the immediate

danger of exposure was removed, Ernestina resented what she termed "the supervision he ever continued to exercise over her conduct." Algernon was deeply afflicted to observe that Ernestina adopted such a course instead of displaying contrition, and he conjured her to reflect ere she prosecuted a career which would inevitably plunge her into disgrace sooner or later. But the more affectionate and conciliatory became her brother's manner, the more haughty and impatient was the spirit which she displayed, and they parted thus, with anger on her side and deep despondency on his own.

Then was it that the high-minded Algernon felt actually ashamed of the family to which he belonged, and blushed for the name he bore, a name which stamped him as a scion of this family which seemed resolved to disgrace itself. The train of thought into which he fell revived all the antipathies he had for some time experienced in respect to the aristocratic order to which he belonged, and he said to himself, "If ever I marry, it shall not be a daughter of the aristocracy. No, I will endeavour to find some maiden of innocence, virtue, and probity in a lowlier sphere, a maiden who, while possessing the attractions of her sex, shall be unacquainted with any of its vices." Thereupon he formed the resolution of abandoning, he cared not even if it were for ever, his lordly rank, and took his late father's Christian name and surname, Jocelyn Loftus. Leaving London, he visited his country-seat in the north of England, where he passed some time. The abdication of Fontainebleau and the retreat of the Emperor Napoleon to Elba giving peace to Europe, the young nobleman visited the Continent, where he stayed some months. On returning to England, he made the tour of Kent, and at length arrived in Canterbury. The old cathedral city, with its quietude and its many antiquarian remains, together with its beautiful circumjacent scenery, was pleasing to Lord Algernon Cavendish, and he was induced to remain there for a few weeks.

One evening, after a long ramble in the country, he was returning to his hotel, when on passing through the cloistral avenue in the vicinage of the cathedral he suddenly heard voices in altercation, and before he reached the spot a sufficiency of what was said reached his ears to afford him a very painful insight into the nature of the dispute. A female

was reproaching some one of the male sex in the bitterest terms, reminding him that years back he had seduced her, and that he had even been base enough to propose to her the murder of the child which was the offspring of their illicit amour. The female went on to upbraid her companion with having shamefully abandoned her at the time, and by his cruelties plunged her into that frenzied state of mind which had led her to become the murderess of her babe.

Algernon, horrified at what he had heard, was so bewildered that he scarcely knew what he was doing, and instead of retreating unperceived, he remained rooted to the spot, a turning in the cloister still concealing him from the disputants and them from him. But suddenly the female gave vent to a loud cry, imploring mercy, and her companion, in a terrible voice, denounced her as his "evil genius" and threatened to kill her outright. Thereupon Algernon sprang forward, and beheld in the gathering gloom of the hour and the place a female upon her knees at the feet of an individual whom he immediately recognized to be the Reverend Bernard Audley, with whom he had formed some slight acquaintance at a reading-room during his sojourn in Canterbury. The female, who was dressed in deep black, was, as the reader of course understands, none other than Lilian Halkin. But with her name, or anything concerning her beyond what he had just heard, Algernon was at the time utterly unacquainted. The minor canon's hand was raised to strike her down, but he instantly fell back, with an ejaculation of alarm, while Lilian sprang to her feet the moment he thus made his appearance.

Then, quickly drawing down her veil, Lilian seized Algernon by the arm, saying, in a quick and excited voice, "Thanks, a thousand thanks, whoever you are, for your well-meant interference, but unless you promise me one thing I shall not continue to experience any gratitude toward you." Algernon at once replied that he had no interest in doing anything to produce vexation in respect to a lady who, judging from what he had heard, was already sufficiently afflicted. "Then, promise me, kind-hearted stranger," said Lilian, "that you will not expose elsewhere this scene of which accident has made you a witness." The young nobleman answered, "You may rely upon it, madam, that the private affairs of yourself and Mr. Audley shall not

be made the topic of useless scandal or idle gossip on my part." Lilian thanked him cordially, and then hurried away. "I also thank you, Mr. Loftus, for the pledge you have just given," said Bernard Audley, so soon as they were alone together; but Algernon merely bowed coldly, and passing hurriedly on, retraced his way to the hotel where he was stopping.

We need not do more than in a few words remind the reader that it was through Bernard Audley's insolent conduct toward Louisa Stanley in the Dane John that Algernon subsequently became acquainted with the beauteous damsel. This incident occurred a short time after the adventure in the cloister, which the young nobleman was compelled to fling as a menace at the infamous clergyman in order to force him to a precipitate departure from the scene of his gross attempt to undermine the purity of Louisa. Thanks to this incident, Algernon was at length brought in contact with a charming, amiable, and excellent girl answering the very description of that embodiment of all female excellences which he depicted to himself as the being that could alone win his heart or be deserving of his hand. We have seen how he cultivated her acquaintance, how each day his favourable opinion of her grew confirmed, and how the more he saw of her the more her amiable qualities developed themselves. At first he thought, when resolved to declare his love, of frankly stating who he was; but then the idea struck him that he would still retain the *incognito*, or, rather, his assumed name, in order to convince himself beyond all possibility of doubt that the humble cottage maiden could love him for himself alone, irrespective of his lordly rank. Moreover, he felt so truly ashamed of the profligacies, the vices, and the immoralities associated with the name of the Marquis of Leveson that he shrank from the idea of confessing himself to be the nephew of that unprincipled voluptuary. He therefore continued in Louisa's eyes as plain Jocelyn Loftus. When his love had been declared and he delicately furnished just so much information respecting himself that Louisa's sister Clara, then in London, might make inquiries concerning his eligibility as Louisa's suitor, he wrote to his banker, giving that gentleman instructions to what extent he was to speak of him to any one calling to take such references, and hence the guarded manner

in which the banker spoke when Clara visited him for the purpose.

Having become the accepted suitor of Louisa, Algernon's intention was to bear her away after the bridal to his country-seat in the north of England, and to transport thither her invalid aunt also. But when last at his rural mansion, he had observed that much of the furniture was in a dilapidated condition and that considerable repairs were required for the dwelling itself. Moreover, it was necessary to have a carriage built expressly for the purpose of the long journey which the aunt would have to take, and paralyzed as she then was, the vehicle must be fitted internally with a couch for her accommodation. To effect all this, a considerable sum of money was needed, and though Algernon was far from extravagant, yet his frequent tours and journeys had exhausted all the resources arising from his comparatively narrow income of six hundred a year. He required a couple of thousand guineas, and had to choose from three ways of obtaining that amount. The first was to mortgage a portion of his income, but this would be to reduce it to so small a revenue as to render it impossible to provide as he could wish for his Louisa and her aunt at his country-seat. The second plan which suggested itself was to borrow money on the security of his expectations as heir to the title and estates of his uncle the marquis, but he abhorred the idea of giving post-obit bonds and entering into the demoralization of usurious proceedings. The third method was to apply direct to his uncle; and much as he disliked the thought of coming in contact with that nobleman, especially to ask a favour, he was nevertheless compelled to make up his mind to this proceeding.

After some deliberation with himself, he to a certain extent surmounted his scruples by the reflection that, as the heir to the estates of the marquis, it was scarcely a favour which he would be asking, especially if he did it in a frank and manly way, without servility or cringing. He therefore proceeded to London, visited his uncle, and procured the money. Losing no time, he remitted a sufficient sum to the steward of his little estate in the north, accompanied with instructions how it was to be expended in the purchase of furniture and the repairs of the mansion, and he gave orders to a carriage-builder in London for the construction of a vehicle with the

accommodations requisite for the use of the then invalid aunt of his Louisa.

But all these preparations for his bridal were somewhat prematurely taken, for, as we have seen, the circumstance of his encounter with Mary Owen made him acquainted with that conspiracy against the Princess of Wales which hurried him on into the series of adventures, and whirled him, as it were, through the storm of incidents that have been duly described in our pages.

Now at last these adventures were finished, those incidents had been brought to a conclusion, and we behold our young hero, no longer Jocelyn Loftus, nor, indeed, as Lord Algernon Cavendish, but as the Marquis of Leveson, reunited to her whom he loved so fondly and whom he was shortly to make his bride.

The reader is now acquainted with all that has hitherto been wrapped up in mystery relative to this excellent young man, and it was the outline of the above explanations which, after dinner at the cottage, he gave to Miss Stanley, Lady Sackville, and Louisa. We need scarcely observe that he touched but lightly upon those particulars that threw out the characters of his departed uncle and perished sister in so disagreeable a light; and this reserve he practised partly from generous motives in respect to the dead, and partly because some of the details were unsuitable for the ears of the innocent Louisa.

On the following day Miss Stanley, the aunt, in a private conversation with the Marquis of Leveson, made him acquainted with that fresh outrage which Bernard Audley had attempted to perpetrate, and which had been the cause of her restoration to vitality and consciousness. The young nobleman was deeply indignant at this narrative. But when he learned from Miss Stanley's lips of that history of the past regarding Mrs. Owen, Melissa, and Lilian, and thereby was informed that the lady in black whom he had seen in the cloister could have been none other than Lilian herself, he resolved upon consigning Bernard Audley's recent atrocity to oblivion. For Miss Stanley knew not that all Lilian's long-cherished love for that bad man had recently turned into the deadliest hate, accompanied by cravings for a bitter vengeance, and thus the young marquis was left with the impression that the unfortunate Lilian was still

attached to her seducer. For this reason was it, and for Lilian's sake, that he came to the determination of passing over the minor canon's conduct in silence, especially as he had made up his mind to remain altogether at Canterbury until, after a decent period of mourning for his sister and uncle, he might lead Louisa to the altar. In the meantime he would be near to guard her from any further danger, although not for an instant did he imagine that so long as he was upon the spot the infamous clergyman would renew his persecutions.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CLIFF

The scene now changes to Dover.

It was the day following that of which we have been writing, and a lady, elegantly dressed, was sauntering alone upon the eminences which terminate abruptly in the chalky cliffs fronting the sea. She was tall and well formed, but her countenance was concealed with a thick veil, folded in such a manner that not even the keenest eyes could penetrate through it so as to discern her features.

To all appearance, judging by her figure, which was very slender, but perfectly upright, and replete with symmetrical grace, she was by no means advanced in years, and as she walked slowly along, her feet and ankles which glanced beneath her dress seemed most delicately shaped. Altogether, she was one whom it was impossible to pass by with indifference, and the air of mystery with which the thick veil, so carefully folded, invested her, added to the interest of her appearance.

It was midday, and the sun was shining gloriously. Calm as an immense lake of quicksilver stretched the sea far away, until it was bounded in the eastern horizon by a barely perceptible line which marked the coast of France. Not a breeze ruffled the surface of the ocean, and the sails of the vessels hung, as it were, listless and passive to the masts.

Slowly did the lady continue her walk, but frequently stopping to gaze upon the mighty expanse of waters which stretched before her from the base of the cliffs on whose summit she was sauntering. And yet it did not altogether seem that she thus paused to view the enchanting prospect, but by her very attitude and manner it was evident that through the thick folds of her veil she was gazing upon

vacancy. Several times she turned quite around, and looked in the direction of the town which lay at the foot of the deep indentation of the cliffs, as if a hollow had been hewn away to afford room for the site of that multitude of buildings. Was she awaiting some one? Had she sauntered hither in the hope of being overtaken by a person that she expected to issue from the town and speed across the heights to join her there?

Presently the sounds of a horse's feet reached her ears as she was pursuing her walk, and now a sudden vibration appeared to thrill through her entire form, galvanizing her, as it were, with the electricity of some feeling abruptly and profoundly stirred. But this time she neither paused nor looked around. She continued her way as if simulating unconsciousness that any one was approaching her.

In a few minutes she was overtaken by the person on horseback, and this was none other than the Reverend Bernard Audley, minor canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

On reaching the lady he reined in his steed, and made a courteous bow, saying, "I am here, fair but mysterious unknown, in pursuance of the billet which I received last evening at my hotel."

"How know you that I am fair?" asked the lady, in a voice that was barely audible.

"Do you not tell me in that note which I received," said the clergyman, "that I have inspired you with a passion which, if I can reciprocate it, you will be found worthy of? And what does that mean, if not a consciousness on your part that you are beautiful?"

The lady made no reply, and a silence of nearly a minute took place. Then, leaping from his horse, Bernard Audley said, in his most winning tone, "Do, for Heaven's sake, shake off this timidity, if such it be. Throw aside all mystery, and let me behold the countenance of whose loveliness I have a presentiment."

"Pray, Mr. Audley, remount your horse," said the lady, still speaking in a very low voice, but now with much agitation in the tones. "We shall be seen, and it looks all too familiar for you to have dismounted thus to walk by my side. It appears like an appointment given, whereas, if you keep on horseback, it will have the air of a simple acquaintance happening to meet a lady. Indeed, it was for this

reason that I charged you in my note to come mounted upon that slendid steed which you manage so well, and on whose back you appear to such advantage. Mount then, I conjure you."

The minor canon did not immediately obey the lady's injunction. He looked very hard at her with all the power of his searching eyes, as if to penetrate through the veil which concealed her countenance, and for a moment it was evident enough, by the expression which passed rapidly over his features, that he did not altogether like the strangeness of her behaviour, and that even some slight suspicion of intended evil had flitted across his mind. But apparently a second thought reassured him, or at least determined him to humour his fair companion; and he accordingly remounted the spirited steed, which for the last minute or two he had held by the bridle. Again, however, did he scan the lady from head to foot, and then he muttered to himself, " Yes, it is her figure. But surely it cannot be she."

" What were you saying? " asked the lady, looking up at him through the folds of her veil.

" I was thinking," he answered, his eyes still fixed intently upon her, " that you remind me strangely of another lady whom I know well, and yet she is in deep mourning."

" Oh, we will not talk of other ladies now," said the veiled unknown, somewhat petulantly, but still in a very subdued voice.

" Now, listen to me," said Bernard Audley, in a resolute tone. " If all that your letter told me be true, I am highly flattered by its contents. In that note you say that for the last few days you have observed me riding on the parade and elsewhere, and that you have been struck by my appearance. This, I repeat, is most flattering, most complimentary. You tell me likewise in your note that you wish me to meet you here soon after midday, and that I am to come on horseback, as if merely for a ride upon the cliffs. I have obeyed your summons, I am here. But now, wherefore, for even the space of these few minutes that have elapsed since I joined you, preserve so much mystery? Why continue to wear that invidious veil over your features, and why speak in subdued tones, as if you sought to disguise your voice? Before we proceed any farther together, do me the favour to lift your veil."

During the short space which the colloquy, so far as it went, had occupied, the lady had continued walking onward; and in so doing she had approached nearer than at first to the edge of the cliffs, so that they were now within a dozen yards of the abyss.

"You would have me raise my veil," the lady now suddenly exclaimed, "in order that you may see my countenance? Behold it, then!" she added, in her natural voice, and flinging back her veil over her elegant bonnet, she revealed the features of Lilian Halkin.

"Ah!" ejaculated the minor canon, "for the last two or three minutes I have not been altogether unprepared for this," and reining in his steed, he fixed his looks intently upon Lilian's countenance, as if he sought to fathom her purpose.

She also stopped short, and encountering his gaze with solemn seriousness of aspect, she said, "Bernard Audley, for the last time we meet, and I wish you to hear a few words from my lips ere we part for ever."

"Well, speak then, Lilian," said the minor canon, scarcely able to conceal an expression of joy which rose to his features at the idea of being thenceforth rid of the continual supervision of one whom he regarded as his evil genius. "But tell me," he immediately added, "is it in friendship or enmity that you have so cunningly contrived this meeting, which you say is to be our last? Wherefore have you thrown aside your mourning? Was it the better to inveigle me hither to this interview? Or, rather, I should ask, why all this preparation, precaution, and mystery at all? Since you found out where I was residing, wherefore did you not come direct to me at the hotel and speak to me there? Are your proceedings ever to be characterized by this sort of romantic mysticism which you doubtless think invests you with a kind of terrorism over me, so as to enable you to wield an influence upon all my actions? Speak, Lilian, I await your explanations."

"I shall not detain you long," was the reply. "I have heard you patiently. It is now your turn to listen with equal attention to me, for this is the last time that you and I shall ever meet in this world. As I told you the other day, in the Dane John, you consider me your evil genius, but for a long series of years have I loved you with all a

woman's most enduring tenderness. But let that pass; I would speak of other things. Do you suppose that I am a stranger to the vile outrage which you attempted upon Louisa Stanley the other night, and which has made you, dreading the consequences, absent yourself from home for a time and come to Dover, so that in case of danger you may be near the French coast? Ah! you perceive, Bernard Audley, that I understand full well your motives in coming hither."

"And what of that?" asked the minor canon, impatiently. "But go on, Lilian, for I warn you that my horse will not stand quietly here for many minutes longer."

"Nor will I detain you many minutes," she rejoined, quickly. "When you went to settle at Canterbury, some eighteen months ago, and took up your abode in that old house which had so recently been a lunatic asylum, and had still some of the rooms fitted up in such a manner as to deaden the shrieks and screams and howlings of those who were once confined therein, you are aware that I also came and settled in the same neighbourhood. You know, likewise, that in consequence of all that occurred in years past, I had vowed never to appear again in the presence of any of my family; but at the time when all those terrible calamities occurred, or, rather, soon after the fearful ordeal of prisonage and trial through which I passed, I secretly made inquiries relative to my sisters. I learned that Melissa had died, leaving two children whose names were Clara and Louisa. Ah! you start, you begin to divine the truth? Well, and it is as you think. For not only did I discover that much, but I likewise ascertained that they had been taken by their aunt, my eldest sister, Lydia, and borne away from London, no one knew whither. Now, then, do you begin to understand how, when eighteen months ago circumstances brought me to Canterbury, I happened to learn that a lady having two nieces, whose names were Clara and Louisa, dwelt in a certain cottage under the name of Stanley, and how I was at once convinced that this lady was my sister and these damsels were Melissa's children? Ah! it was this circumstance which made me doubly watchful over Louisa's welfare and safety when I found her the object of your unhallowed desires; and though I chose not to introduce myself as a relative to that young maiden, I nevertheless

vowed to become her protecting genius. Bernard Audley, you now understand that it was my own niece, my dead sister's offspring, whom you would have basely sacrificed to your passion."

"But I knew not of this relationship between you," exclaimed the minor canon, growing still more impatient than at first, especially as his steed was pawing the ground in a restless manner.

"No, you knew it not," said Lilian, "but even if you had been aware of the circumstance, it would not have stayed the wild career of your passions. Oh, man of infamy, hast thou no fear for the future, thou who makest such a bad use of the present? But the time for vengeance has arrived. Too long, oh, far too long, have I endured your scorn, your indifference, perhaps even your hate, I who sacrificed everything and endured so much on your account. Yes, Bernard Audley, I now hate as much as I once loved, and when the love of a woman turns to hatred, it is bitterness indeed."

"Lilian, you are mad. I leave you," exclaimed the minor canon, and he endeavoured to wheel his horse around so as to gallop back over the heights.

But Lilian Halkin, with a wild cry, extended her arms suddenly, and rushed forward in such a manner that the steed started in affright and reared straight up. Then thrilled forth a still wilder cry from the lips of Bernard Audley, through whose brain flashed a harrowing sense of the fearful catastrophe that must ensue. Desperately did he dash his heels into the flanks of his steed, in the hope of making him spring forward, but Lilian, now inspired with the malignant fury of a fiend, waved her white handkerchief before the eyes of the terrified animal, who backed suddenly and reared again. All this was the work of a few moments, and the next instant over they went, horse and man!

Terrific were the cries of both as they fell down the abyss, and Lilian, standing upon the very edge of the cliff, beheld the frightful fall. In another instant all was still, the catastrophe was accomplished, the steed and its master lay motionless upon the beach below.

Then Lilian Halkin turned away and fled precipitately. At a distance down the sloping eminences she met some persons, to whom, with a real horror in her looks, — for

this there was no need to simulate, — she declared that a terrible accident had just occurred.

They descended by the shortest way to the beach, and there beheld the minor canon and the horse both dead and frightfully mangled. Lilian, however, remained at a distance, but when the persons rejoined her again, they told her she would have to give evidence at a coroner's inquest. This she did, and with a manner utterly defying suspicion that she herself had been the cause of the catastrophe, did she give a feasible version of the occurrence. The jury were satisfied, a verdict of " Accidental death " was returned, and Lilian Halkin embarked for France.

On the morning which followed that of her departure, Miss Stanley received a letter containing these words:

" Dover.

" My dear Lydia: — I am about to quit England for ever. Bernard Audley is no more. I beheld him perish in a manner that will doubtless strike you as being fraught with retributive justice for the evil he has done me. It was a shocking accident that caused his death, and it was a strange chance that rendered me the spectatress thereof. The newspapers will furnish you with full particulars.

" At present I know not where I shall fix my abode, nor whether, indeed, I shall adopt any settled habitation at all. The agitation of my thoughts and the whirlwind which rages in my mind appear only to be compatible with a wild, erratic existence.

" But you shall hear from me occasionally; and as I must now be dependent upon you for my bread, I shall periodically let you know to what address you can forward me the trifle that will suffice for my wants. Had you continued poor, Lydia, I would sooner have begged my bread than have encroached upon your bounty, but as there is now wealth in the family, I hesitate not to crave the pittance which may sustain me.

" We shall never meet again, dear Lydia, but you and all who are dear to you will constantly be present in my thoughts.

" Your affectionate sister,

" The Unfortunate Lilian."

Thus was it that she kept her own secret respecting the real cause of Bernard Audley's horrible death, and thus was it also that no member of the family to which she belonged ever had to experience a sickening at the heart through the knowledge that Lilian was a murderess.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GATHERING OF A STORM

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when the Hangman paid a visit to his friend Bencull at the den of infamy in Jacob's Island. On being admitted by the master of the place, Daniel Coffin said, in a rough, impatient tone, " Well, what's the matter? Is anything amiss? Why did you send up that pressing message just now to tell me to come down at once? "

" Can't you wait a minute or two, till we are cosy in the back room together? " asked Bencull. " But you don't give a feller time even to shut the door."

" Well, look sharp about it," said the Hangman, " 'cause why, I don't like these sudden messages, — they make one afraid."

The door being secured, the two ruffians passed into the back room, where Bencull at once produced pipes and a bottle of spirits.

" Now, then, what is it all about? " demanded the Hangman.

" Why, I don't much like summat that I see this afternoon," answered Bencull. " There was that Buttoner feller talking to old Mother Franklin at the corner of the street where Mrs. Young lives."

" Is that all? " asked the Hangman, contemptuously. " Why shouldn't the Buttoner stop and chat with old Mother Franklin? Didn't he live for some time with Nell Gibson at Mrs. Young's, and isn't it natural enough, then, that he should look on Mother Franklin as an old acquaintance? "

" Well and good," responded Bencull, " but there's a great deal to be judged of by the manner of people, and also by any little word or two that one may catch accidentally."

"Go on and tell us what you mean, without this round-about palaver," and as the Hangman spoke he tossed off a glass of gin.

"First of all," continued Bencull, "I saw that the Buttoner and Mother Franklin was talking in a very peculiar and confidential way, as if they had some matter of importance in hand. The Buttoner once or twice put his hand up to his head, and looked, just for all the world, like a chap that is full of remorse; and then Mother Franklin spoke to him with great earnestness, as if trying to persuade him to tell her summat. So I watched the opportunity, got around behind 'em, and then sauntered up as if quite in a promiscuous way. They didn't see me till I was close upon them, and I heard them both mention the name of Nell Gibson."

"Ah! this does really, then, begin to look serious," observed the Hangman. "But what next?"

"When they saw me they both looked precious confused. The Buttoner stared at me in quite a suspicious way, just like a chap that means to peach. But that old wretch, Mother Franklin, immediately recovered her presence of mind, and, taking a pinch of snuff, wagged her old jaws and said summat in what she meant to be a good-humoured way. I pretended not to have noticed anything queer, and very soon walked on. Then I at once came back home again, and sent the Durrynacker straight up to you. The Mushroom Faker called soon after, and I told him also what had happened. They are both coming back presently."

"But you don't think the Buttoner really means peaching?" asked Coffin, a diabolical expression settling upon his countenance.

"I have my fears, I can tell you," answered Bencull, "or else why the deuce should I have sent up for you, or told those fellers to come back again? Don't you recollect how the Buttoner behaved that night when we did Nell's business? The moment the gal was strangled, didn't the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cry like a child? Why, I recollect perfectly well you roared out to ask what the devil was the meaning of that blubbering — "

"Ah! and I recollect, too, now you speak of it," interrupted the Hangman. "The Buttoner said it was only a sort of nervous fit that he could not help for the moment."

"Ay," added Bencull, "and he cried out for us to take

her away and not let her stare up at him with her eyes that was fixed and dull as if made of glass; and he trembled all over with convulsions."

"So he did," remarked the Hangman, "and while you and me shoved the dead body over into the dike, we were obliged to leave the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durrynacker here to look after the Buttoner. But what has the Buttoner been doing ever since then? I don't think I have seen him more than once or twice."

"For the last two or three months I haven't seen him at all," said Bencull, "until this afternoon. It's true I hadn't thought much about him, because he is often out on the tramp for several months together; but when he turned up in this queer way just now, and I saw him with old Mother Franklin, it made me feel just as if I was all of a sudden in Queer Street. I say, Dan'el, I suppose you know pretty well that Mother Franklin doesn't like you a bit?"

"The old harridan!" growled the Hangman, "she wants to be tumbled over into the ditch. But, I say, this is getting rather serious about the Buttoner —"

At this moment there was a knock at the street door, and Bencull at once observed, "Here's the other coves."

He then proceeded to answer the summons, and speedily returned, accompanied by the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker.

The four ruffians now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate on the threatening aspect which affairs appeared to have assumed in respect to the murder of Nell Gibson. Several plans were discussed. The Mushroom Faker proposed that they should entice, or convey by force, both Mother Franklin and the Buttoner down to the crib and make away with them. Bob the Durrynacker suggested flight, but Bencull was inclined to support the Mushroom Faker's murderous project. The Hangman sat listening in silence to the deliberations that were thus going on.

"Well, why don't you say what you think?" asked Bencull. "Come, Dan'el, speak out."

"I hardly know what to decide upon," was his response. "As for bolting, that's altogether out of the question. I tell you what I will do," he added, after a few moments' reflection, "I'll just toddle up to Mrs. Young's and see how things look there."

This suggestion was cordially approved of by his companions, and the Hangman accordingly proceeded forthwith to the neighbouring street where Mrs. Young dwelt. On arriving there, he was admitted by old Mother Franklin, who for a moment looked as if she were startled by his appearance; but immediately recovering herself, she said, with a grin, "Well, Mr. Coffin, so you have come to see us again, eh? You don't desert us altogether. But it's a long time since you have been here. I don't think since Nell Gibson left us," and she looked very hard in the Hangman's face as she thus spoke.

"I have not had any business down this way since then," answered Coffin, whose features betrayed not the slightest indication of conscious guilt. "Is Mrs. Young in?"

"No, she be not," replied Mother Franklin. "But you can walk into the parlour, Mr. Coffin, and wait till she comes."

Thus speaking, the old woman threw open the door, and the public executioner passed into the room. He found no one there, and taking a seat, asked, "How long will Mrs. Young be before she comes back?"

"Not above half an hour or so," was Mother Franklin's response. Then, as she took a huge pinch of snuff from her box with an indecent picture on the lid, she said, "Will you take anything, Mr. Coffin?"

"That's one word for me and two for yourself," answered the Hangman, affecting a good-humoured smile. "Well, get some gin," and he flung half a crown upon the table.

The old woman sped forth to secure the liquor, and when she returned, in about five minutes, Coffin said, "Now you shall mix two glasses, one for yourself and one for me. I don't know how it is, but I think I am no great favourite of yours, just because I chaffed you on one occasion."

"Yes, when you was here to see Nell Gibson," Mother Franklin hastened to add; and the quickness with which she spoke brought on a fit of coughing that nearly choked her and made the scalding rheum run down her wrinkled cheeks.

"Now, then, old woman," observed the Hangman, "you will go out of the world in one of those shaky fits, if you don't mind."

"Ah, well, I suppose my time ain't wery far off," she replied, wagging her toothless jaws. "I am eighty-two

come next Febiverry, and have had a pretty long run of it. Ah! and I have seen a many strange things, too, a blessed many things, Mr. Coffin."

"No doubt of it," he answered. "But come, let us drink to a better understanding betwixt us. I recollect I threw a shilling at you once and called you an old beldame. I was very wrong, but I only did it in fun. There's no harm in me. I am as innocent and as quiet as any lamb, though perhaps I don't look much like one."

Mother Franklin stared at him as if, indeed, she thought that he was very far from having a lamblike appearance, and there was something in her look which Coffin did not fancy, for it seemed to confirm the dark suspicions which Bencull's information had already engendered.

"Howsomever," he continued, affecting a jocular mood, "if I flung you a shilling once and called you an old beldame, I now toss you a guinea and call you a dear good old creature."

He suited the action to the word with regard to the money, and Mother Franklin, taking it up, was evidently much rejoiced at so unexpected a present.

"Where's Mrs. Young gone?" asked the Hangman.

"I don't know," was the response. "She's on'y just stepped out a bit."

"Well, it struck me I saw her just now," remarked the Hangman, assuming a careless tone and look, "and I thought that the Buttoner was with her."

The statement he thus made was false, but he spoke in this manner in order to see what effect the mention of the Buttoner's name would have upon Mother Franklin.

"Very likely," she answered, taking another pinch of snuff.

"Oh, then the Buttoner has turned up again?" said the Hangman. "I have not seen him this long while. Where's he been?"

"I am sure I don't know," rejoined Mother Franklin, somewhat roughly, and she again looked very hard at the public executioner, as if to ascertain whether he had any sinister object in putting these questions.

"Ah! but I happen to know," proceeded Coffin, observing how she regarded him, and fully comprehending the nature of her scrutiny, so that his suspicion of something being

wrong was now fully confirmed, " I happen to know that he does speak pretty frankly to you."

" Well, I suppose that Bencull has told you he saw me and the Buttoner talking together this arternoon. But what of that? " asked the old woman. " I suppose that old acquaintances may stop and chat if they like."

" How you are going on! " interrupted the Hangman, affecting to laugh. " Why, of course old acquaintances will talk, and I suppose that, as I am an old acquaintance also, there is no harm in my asking about the Buttoner in a friendly way. I always thought he was a good fellow, and was glad to hear he had come back to London again. Will he be here to-night? "

" I can't say," replied Mother Franklin.

" But he did go out with Mrs. Young, didn't he, now? "

" No," she returned, " he did not," and though she looked with bold hardihood in the Hangman's face, he nevertheless saw right well that his random assertion had conveyed a truth and that the Buttoner had actually gone out with Mrs. Young.

" Well, then," he rejoined, " I can positively declare that I saw them together."

" And what if you did? " demanded Mother Franklin. " It's no business of mine, or of yourn either. What's it got to do with us? I suppose you don't care where the Buttoner goes, or who he goes with."

" Not a fig," answered the Hangman. Then, having taken a long draught of gin and water, he said, with apparent carelessness of manner, " By the bye, any news of Nell Gibson? I wonder what the deuce has become of that gal. What made her bolt, do you think, from this place? She didn't owe your missus any money, did she? "

" Not a farthing. She had plenty of money, as I dare say you very well know," and Mother Franklin nodded significantly at the public executioner.

" Yes, there had been some little affairs — the Shooter's Hill business, for instance — which had put some money into all our pockets, and Nell had her share. But you haven't told me whether anything has been heard of her? "

" How should I know? " asked Mother Franklin, snappishly. " Nell was no favourite of mine. She used to give herself precious airs toward me and — But no matter. I

don't bear the poor thing any more ill-will, wherever she is."

"Isn't it strange," asked the Hangman, totally unabashed, "that nothing's been heard of her for so long?"

"Wery strange indeed," answered Mother Franklin. "The last night I ever saw her I remember I was uncommon lushy, and she said some cutting things to me. The Buttoner came to fetch her away, and she never returned no more."

"Where did he take her to?" asked Coffin, looking as innocent as his hangdog countenance would permit him.

"Ah! that's more than I can say. If I had known at the time, I should have gone and inquired after her when I found that she didn't come back."

"Well, I suppose, now that you have seen the Buttoner again, you have asked him what became of Nell?" and Daniel Coffin once more looked very hard in Mother Franklin's face.

At this moment the street door was heard to open, evidently by means of a latch-key, and Mother Franklin observed, "Here's missus," having said which she went forth very hurriedly into the passage, as if to give some warning, or intercept Mrs. Young and the person who had just entered with her; for that the mistress of the house had returned with a companion was apparent from the sounds of two persons' footsteps in the passage.

The Hangman, instantaneously suspecting that Mrs. Young's companion was the Buttoner, and recognizing in Mother Franklin's sudden disappearance a further proof that treachery was intended, lost no time in following her into the passage, and there, sure enough, he beheld the paramour of the murdered Nell Gibson. There was a light in the passage, and the Hangman's countenance was seen to grow instantaneously diabolic in its expression, but in a moment, mastering his rage, he extended his hand to the Buttoner, saying, "Ah, old fellow! I heard that you had come back. How do you find yourself?"

The man, who had a very miserable and downcast aspect, as if a load of care were upon his mind, said, "I can't shake hands with you, Coffin. I have something here that won't let me," and he placed his hand upon his heart.

"What the devil does all this mean?" growled the Hang-

man, not knowing exactly what to do, or whether to resent this conduct on the part of the Buttoner; but the next moment, thinking it best to take his departure, he exclaimed, "Come, stand aside and let me be off. I see very well that I am not wanted here."

But the Buttoner placed his back against the street door, saying, "You can't go," and at the same moment both Mrs. Young and Mother Franklin seized upon the public executioner like two tiger-cats, the elder woman, despite her great age, being, if anything, the more ferocious of the two.

For an instant the Hangman was overpowered in that narrow passage, but the next moment he burst away from the two women, dashing Mrs. Young into the parlour, and trampling old Mother Franklin under his feet. Their cries were horrible, and now the Buttoner sprang at the Hangman, threw his arms around his neck, and clung to him with the tenacity of a boa-constrictor. They fell, struggling desperately, in the passage, and several females who belonged to the house of ill-fame, being alarmed by the noise, came rushing down the stairs, some in a state of more than seminudity. Without comprehending the motive which led to the attack upon the Hangman, but zealous in taking the part of the mistress of the place, they at once precipitated themselves upon Coffin, against whom Mrs. Young was levelling the most horrible menaces.

But the Hangman was not yet overpowered. He possessed a lion's strength, and was now as desperate as the maddened beast itself when the hunters hold it at bay. With one tremendous effort he shook off the female furies who had pounced upon him, released himself from the grasp of the Buttoner, and with the iron heel of his great thick boot dealt that individual such a blow that left him senseless upon the floor, where he lay. Another instant and the Hangman's hand was upon the latch of the street door, but again did the females from up-stairs dart upon him, while Mrs. Young herself reappeared from the parlour, armed with the poker.

Through the posse of furies rushed the Hangman, scattering them in the passage as a bull dashes aside right and left a crowd when careering through it; and in another moment the formidable weapon was wrenched from Mrs.

Young's hand. Then striking all about at random, thus doing serious injury, and even breaking bones, the Hangman regained the front door, sprang forth, and hurried away as quickly as his legs would carry him.

His ideas being all in confusion, he instinctively sped in the direction of Jacob's Island; but as he neared that spot the thought suddenly struck him that there might be danger there. He accordingly turned aside, took another direction, gained London Bridge, traversed it, and reaching the City, hastened along toward Fleet Lane.

But while pursuing his way, his ideas began to settle themselves in his mind, and it struck him that if there were danger for him at Jacob's Island, there might be likewise peril at his own house; that is to say, if the Buttoner had peached and the constables were on the lookout, he would stand the same chance of being arrested in Fleet Lane as at Bencull's crib. He stopped short, and stood irresolute how to act. He felt as if the crisis of his destiny were at hand. What could he do? The very worst was to be apprehended. Everything seemed to indicate that the Buttoner had already peached relative to Nell Gibson's murder, or that he meant to do so. Else why should he and the women have sought to detain him?

The Hangman turned into one of the narrow streets leading down toward Cripplegate, and entering a low boozing-ken, he went into the public-room, sat down, and called for liquor and a pipe. No one besides himself happened to be in the room at the time, and he was glad to have this opportunity of deliberating seriously upon the course which he should pursue. Taking a draught of the liquor which was provided, and lighting his pipe, he set himself to think. But his reflections brought no comfort. Dangers stared him in the face, and he who had twined the halter around the neck of so many now felt as if it were twining around his own.

He thought of flying from London, but whither could he go? He knew full well that it would be difficult to disguise himself, and that if a hue and cry were raised, his recognition would be inevitable. Besides, he did not happen to have much money in his pocket at the time, and he was well aware how impossible it was to get on without a plentiful supply of the needful. He determined, therefore, to stay in London,

at least until the morrow; and while revolving in his mind the different places where he thought he might lie hid, he remembered Taggarty's chandlery shop on Mutton Hill, Clerkenwell.

Issuing forth from the boozing-ken, he was proceeding in the direction of Clerkenwell, when he suddenly recollected the disinclination which Taggarty had evinced to harbour him on that occasion when he called there and met Sally and Dick Melmoth, after his escape from drowning in the Thames, at the time of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's.

"Bill Taggarty," he said to himself, "wouldn't have me then, and it's no use my going to him now. And yet he is very friendly with Dick and Sally. He brought them up, as one may say, when he was the Kinchin-Grand, and therefore he wouldn't mind going and letting them know that I have got into trouble and must see one of them as soon as possible."

Therefore, without any further hesitation, the Hangman pursued his way toward Mutton Hill, and shortly entered the little chandlery shop kept by William Taggarty.

This individual was seated in the small parlour behind the shop, but the moment the glazed door communicating with the street opened and the little bell tinkled, Taggarty came forth.

"Hullo, Dan'el! is that you?" said the chandler, who, not knowing that anything was wrong, now seemed tolerably cordial in his welcome, although the Hangman was no great favourite of his; but it suited his purpose to keep on as good terms as possible with all those persons who were acquainted with his antecedents.

"Yes, it's me as large as life, Bill," returned the Hangman. "But let's step inside into your parlour, for I want to talk to you a bit."

Into the little room behind the shop did Taggarty accordingly lead the way, and producing his gin-bottle and glasses, he sat down, the Hangman already having thrown himself upon a seat.

"Is anything the matter?" asked the chandler, now observing that there was a certain degree of trouble in Coffin's looks.

"Well, I can't say things are quite as right as they should be," responded the Hangman. "But when do you usually shut up this shop of yours?"

"About ten, but to-night, being Saturday, I keep it open until twelve."

"Well, it's just close upon twelve now," observed Coffin, "and so I suppose you can shut up at once, can't you?"

"Do you want me to do anything for you?" asked Taggarty.

"Yes, I don't exactly feel it convenient to go home," rejoined Coffin, "and therefore I want you to run down and tell Sal that she must come up and see me at once."

"What, in the middle of the night?" exclaimed the chandler. "Then there must be really summut very unpleasant that's occurred?"

"In plain terms, Bill," said the Hangman, "I am afraid that the traps are after me."

"What for? Some new affair?" asked Taggarty.

"Oh, I will tell you all about it when you come back. You go and fetch Sally or Dick, but I would rather have Sally, of the two."

"By the bye, what's become of Jack the Foundling?" inquired the chandler, as he rose from his seat and put on his hat to depart on the errand now entrusted to him.

"Oh, he's been out of my hands a long time," answered Coffin, "and I don't know what the deuce has become of him. He got well-nigh killed on Westminster Bridge seven or eight months ago, — it's too long a story to tell now, — and was taken to a surgeon's close in the neighbourhood where the accident occurred, and ever since then I have lost all trace of him. But don't let us wait to chatter. You cut down to Fleet Lane and make Sal come up shortly. On second thoughts, she had better not come with you, or yet take a direct course; and if she should think there is anybody on the watch dogging her steps, then she mustn't come here at all, but must go quite in another direction, so as to put them off their scent. Now, then, Bill, do you understand, and will you manage this thing cleverly, as you know how to do it if you like?"

"I will, Dan'el," returned the chandler; and he forthwith took his departure.

An hour elapsed, during which the Hangman experienced the most feverish anxiety, which was moreover artificially stimulated by the deep inroads he made upon Taggarty's gin-bottle. He frequently gnashed his teeth with rage, or

clenched his fist and struck it forcibly upon the table. Often, too, during that hour, did he go and listen at the street door to hear if footsteps were approaching. The clock of Clerkenwell Church proclaimed one, and still Taggarty did not return. What could be keeping him? If he went quick, he need not be more than ten minutes going, and the like time for coming back, which would leave him forty minutes to stop and talk in Fleet Lane. Surely, then, he ought to be back by this time. Was Taggarty capable of betraying him? No, the Hangman rejected that idea. Why, then, did he not return?

At length, about ten minutes past one, the chandler made his appearance. His looks were haggard and frightened, and Coffin at once saw that he had obtained some evil intelligence.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, in a voice expressive of the most poignant impatience.

"There's a terrible smash," was Taggarty's reply. "Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker are all three arrested, and the officers have been to Fleet Lane —"

"Malediction!" ejaculated the Hangman, in a low but terrible voice of concentrated rage. "What else, Bill? Go on, tell me everything."

"It appears that the Buttoner has peached and all particulars about Nell Gibson is known. You had better be off, Dan'el, as quick as ever you can. Sally will meet you in two hours down at old Jeremy Humpage's in Whitechapel."

"What on earth made her fix upon that place?" cried the Hangman. "She ought to know very well that old Jeremy won't open his house at such a time of night, or, rather, in the morning; and that even if it was the middle of the day, he wouldn't like to receive a visit from me when I am in trouble. It would be all very well if I had a lot of things to dispose of, plate or jewelry, or what not."

"Well, but Sally says you must make the old man let you in, and nobody will think of looking for you there. You couldn't go to Joe Parkes's, ón Saffron Hill, close by here, nor yet to Meg Blowen's, in the Almonry. Sharp Mawley's in the Mint is done up, and Polly Scratchem, in Whitechapel, is no friend of yourn. So Sally was bewildered, and thought it best for you to go at once to old Jeremy's."

"Well, and I don't know but what, after all, it's the best

dodge," observed the Hangman. "But what the deuce made you so long?"

"Why, Sally had gone over to Jacob's Island to give you a hint that Larry's men had been to Fleet Lane, and she hadn't come back when I called. So Dick begged me to wait, and I did. But pray don't delay any longer. I might have been followed, for anything I know, though I don't think I was, for I kept a sharp lookout as I came along."

The Hangman tossed off another glass of gin and water, to cheer his spirits, as he said, and then, having thanked Taggarty for his kindness, took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OLD FENCE'S ABODE

In one of the narrowest, dirtiest, and most pestilential streets of that maze of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization known as Whitechapel, the habitation of Jeremy Humpage was situated. It consisted of two houses thrown into one, for the old man ostensibly carried on the business of second-hand clothes dealer, but his real occupation was that of receiver of stolen goods. Indeed, as set forth in an early part of this narrative, he was an inveterate "fence," but he generally managed matters so cunningly as to escape the meshes of the law.

His profits were immense, and he had correspondents upon the Continent by whose aid he carried on a considerable portion of his illicit commerce. For instance, when a robbery of bank-notes for large amounts was accomplished, and payment of them was stopped at the Bank of England, Humpage would purchase them of the thieves, and the instant they fell into his possession he would despatch them to his correspondents in Holland or France, where they were immediately passed into circulation. Or again, if diamonds or other precious stones of very large value came into his possession, these were also sent off to the Continent, where they were readily disposed of. Nor was this all the service which his foreign correspondents rendered him; but inasmuch as he purchased his goods at one-twentieth part of their real value, he was enabled to make constant shipments of large quantities of articles, the impost of Continental tariffs still leaving him a very large margin for profit.

The reader will therefore understand how it was that Mr. Jeremy Humpage required a somewhat large establish-

ment, and he had several persons in his employment. But these individuals did not dwell in his habitation. His old housekeeper, a woman nearly of his own age, was the only individual who slept on the premises besides himself.

On the particular night, however, of which we are writing, Jeremy Humpage had a friend with him. This was his agent and accomplice, the Swag Chovey Bloak, another " fence " whose acquaintance the reader may remember to have made at Bencull's crib the first time that it was introduced to his notice.

It was now past two o'clock in the morning, the Sabbath morning, too, and the Swag Chovey Bloak was still closeted with Jeremy Humpage in a back room of the establishment in Whitechapel. But of very peculiar construction and arrangements was this back room. The window was entirely boarded up, with merely two circular holes about four inches in diameter toward the top, for the purpose of letting in the fresh air. The door of this room fitted so exactly into the wainscoted passage whence it opened, and was so minutely uniform with the other part of the woodwork, that not even the keenest observer would have noticed, when in the passage, that it was a door at all. No hinges were visible, no crevices nor creases which might trace the outline of a door, nor was there any handle, latch, or lock to be seen. The hinges were invisible, and the door opened by means of a secret spring. The interior of the room showed a floor, walls, and ceiling blackened with smoke. There was a large furnace, with a melting-pot fixed over a grating to which a pair of bellows were so adjusted as to enable any one standing by to sustain an incessant fanning of the fire under that grating. A table and three or four chairs constituted the furniture.

In this room it was that, at two o'clock on the Sunday morning, we now find old Jeremy Humpage and his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak. There was wine upon the table, and not only wine, but also a tray containing the materials for an excellent repast, as well as two or three dishes of the summer fruits then in season. For old Jeremy was regaling himself and his friend on the strength of a most lucrative transaction which they had concluded a few hours back. This was nothing more nor less than a purchase of a large quantity of plate that had been stolen from some rich per-

son's house, and as initials and armorial bearings were engraven on every article of the plunder, the melting-pot was gradually fusing the whole into a solid mass.

Jeremy and his friend were chatting gaily, drinking their wine, as they watched the melting process, and taking it by turns to work the bellows. Suddenly a sharp ring was heard at the street door. By the light of the candles, as well as by that of the candescent charcoal under the melting-pot, the two fences gazed upon each other with troubled looks, for notwithstanding the admirable precautions taken to conceal the laboratory where their operations were going on, their consciences were not sufficiently pure to guarantee them against the sudden alarm which this imperious ringing at such an hour was so well calculated to excite.

The old housekeeper had for some hours past been in bed; but even if she were up, she would not have been permitted to open the door at that time of night, or, rather, morning. Old Jeremy therefore rose from his seat, took one of the candles, and issuing forth from the room, carefully closed the mysterious door behind him. Descending the stairs, he drew back the bolts of the front door, but left the chain still up, so that when open to the width of a foot it was still safely secured against any intruder.

"Let me in, Mr. Jeremy, let me in," said a female voice. "I wish to speak to you particularly."

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Don't you know me, Sally Melmoth?" was the response.

"Ah! Daniel Coffin's friend. But what do you want?"

"I cannot speak here, and it is important. Let me in."

Jeremy Humpage hesitated no longer, but letting go the chain, gave the woman admittance. Then closing the door, he replaced the chain and shot the bolts back into their sockets. Having done this, he led the way into a little parlour on the ground floor, and, placing the light upon the table, awaited the explanation which the woman had to give for this unseasonable visit.

"Mr. Humpage, pray don't be angry with me," she began, "but I am in very great trouble."

"Trouble!" he immediately ejaculated, trembling all over, "then what on earth do you come to me for? You know very well that I can't help you. But what sort of trouble is it? Something about Daniel Coffin, I suppose.

Why, that man was born to get into trouble. What chances, what opportunities he has had! What business we have done together! And yet, somehow or other, he is always running into scrapes."

"But since you have done so much business with him," observed Sally Melmoth, "won't you give him your advice? To tell you the truth, relying on your friendship, I have made an appointment for him to come and meet me here."

"Come here?" actually screamed the old man, his shrivelled form shaking from head to foot, and continuing to tremble, as if with the palsy, while he went on to say, in a sharp, querulous tone, "What an hour to make an appointment at a person's house! I won't have it, I can't have it."

"But it is done, the appointment is made," said Sally Melmoth, "and it's too late to alter it. I must wait for him here."

"When will he come? When will he come?" asked the old man, nervously.

"In about half an hour or so," was the response. "I walked quicker than usual, and therefore got here sooner than I expected. Come, Mr. Jeremy, pray don't look so cross about it. We shall do you no harm, and surely Daniel has put enough things in your way at different times to induce you to show him this little civility."

"Well, well, I don't know but what you say is true enough," observed the ancient fence, somewhat softened. "But it must be a very bad case indeed for Daniel to make his appointments here. It shows as if all his usual haunts and wonted cribs had become too hot to hold him. Come, tell me frankly, Sal, what is the matter?"

"Why, you know Nell Gibson?"

"Ah! she disappeared in a strange way some time ago. What about her?"

"It's just for that disappearance that Daniel's in trouble," answered Sal, "and moreover, there's a precious break-up down at the Folly Bridges."

"At Bencull's?" asked the old man.

"Yes. But hark! there's Daniel!" she exclaimed, as the bell rang.

Old Humpage took up the light and went to open the door. In less than a minute he returned to the parlour, followed

by the Hangman, whose grim countenance expanded into a sort of smile of satisfaction on beholding Sally Melmoth, for he was just now in that desperate situation when such a proof of fidelity on her part was calculated to touch his stony heart.

"Now you can talk over matters together," said Jeremy, "and I will come back to you in half an hour."

"Very good," said the Hangman; and when the old fence had quitted the room, he drew his chair close up to Sally Melmoth, saying, "Now, tell me all about it."

"I don't know how it was," began the woman, "but when Bencull sent up for you this evening I thought there was something wrong, and I was very dull and miserable after you went out. It was half-past seven when you left, and Dick was gone out. So there I was left all alone, to mope by myself, till the blues came over me. At about ten Dick came back, and finding me so miserable, he would make me take some spirits. Well, he and I were just sitting down to a comfortable glass, when a knock was heard at the door, and on Dick's opening it, in walked three of Mr. Sampson's men. Of course they wouldn't believe us when we declared that you wasn't in, and they searched the whole place. We asked what was the matter, but they would not tell us; they were as mum as mice. At length, being satisfied that you was not there, they went away. As soon as they were gone and I thought the coast was clear, I stole out and cut across to the Folly Bridges as quick as my legs would carry me. But when I got down to Bencull's, the place was all shut up and no light to be seen. Three or four groups of people were, however, talking together in low whispers in Mill Street, and I went up to one party and asked what was the matter. Then they told me that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with a lot of his men, had suddenly invaded Bencull's house, some getting in by the gallery behind, and others bursting open the street door. They took Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker prisoners, and hurried them away. But one of the constables, who, it seems, had watched in the street while the capture was being made, told the inhabitants who came out of the neighbouring houses that it was on account of the murder of a gal named Nell Gibson, and that one of the chaps engaged in it had peached. I likewise heard the people say that Daniel

Coffin was in it, and that the officers were looking after him."

"That scoundrel the Buttoner!" growled the Hangman, in a low tone of condensed ferocity. "By Satan! I wouldn't mind swinging if I could only be revenged on him."

"Oh, don't talk in that horrid manner, Daniel!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, crying.

"Well, go on," he observed. "What did you do next?"

"I hastened back from the Folly Bridges as quick as ever I could to Fleet Lane," she continued, wiping her eyes, "and there I found Taggarty. I didn't know where to make an appointment to meet you, but I thought that this place would be the best, and I'll tell you why. Because," continued the young woman, "Larry Sampson knows very well how prudent and cautious and particular in all his doings old Jeremy is, and he would no more think of looking for you beneath this roof than in the king's palace. There will be a precious hue and cry to-morrow, or, rather, presently, for the new day has begun already some time, and you must lay up in lavender as close as ever you can till the storm has so far blown over that you can get away to France."

"What, then, do you propose? That I should stay here for awhile?" asked the Hangman, evidently well pleased with the suggestion. "But old Jeremy won't allow it."

"Nonsense, Daniel! How can he prevent it?" exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "You tell him you must stay here for a day or two, and then when once he is implicated in concealing you at all, even for a few hours, he won't dare turn around upon you, because he would be getting himself into trouble for having harboured you. Besides, a miserable, timid old man like him, that you can blow out of existence with a breath, won't dare oppose your will. So you can force yourself upon him, and he must do his best to conceal you."

"Trust a woman for ready wit and invention!" exclaimed the Hangman. "You argue like a philosopher, Sal, and your advice shall be adopted. But I say, are you sure that you wasn't followed, coming up here just now?"

"I am sure of it," answered Sally, —"at least as sure as a person well could be in such a case. But tell me, is there anything you want done?"

"Nothing particular at present. You had better not come near me again for some days, 'cause why, a watch is

sure to be set upon your movements. If I want to communicate with you, it shall be through old Humpage. So now you understand; and if Larry Sampson or any of his people call, mind you pretend that you haven't the slightest idea where the deuce I can be."

"Trust me for that," answered Sally Melmoth.

Jeremy Humpage now returned to the room, saying, "Well, my good friends, have you had your little talk out? I suppose you are ready to go now, for I must think of retiring to bed."

"I tell you what it is, friend Humpage," responded the Hangman, "I am going to sponge on your kindness till night comes on again."

"What! stay here?" screamed the old man. "Impossible! impossible!" and he shivered from head to foot.

"Now, come, don't be inhospitable," said the Hangman, soothingly. "If you was in trouble, and came to Fleet Lane, saying, 'My dear Mr. Coffin, I rely upon your courtesy and friendship,' or some suchlike gentlemanly terms, you would receive a noble reception. So I expect the same from you."

"But, my good friend," remonstrated Jeremy, "you know that I never mix myself up in the concerns of others; and this too," he added, with a visible shudder, "is so very, very serious."

"Come, don't you pretend to be a saint," interrupted the Hangman, with a return of his wonted gruffness of manner. "That dodge won't do. What the devil are you thinking of? To turn me out here at three o'clock in the morning, just when it is getting light? Why, I should be grabbed up directly."

"Well," observed Humpage, liking the present adventure as little as might be, "if it's only the matter of a few hours, of course I cannot be so cruel as to refuse. But on the positive understanding that when night comes again —"

"To be sure! I shall only be too glad to be safe off," cried the Hangman; but he darted a significant look at Sally Melmoth, as much as to say that now he was once safely installed beneath the old man's roof, he should not take his departure until it fully suited his convenience.

To be brief, Sally bade her paramour farewell, and issued forth on her way back to Fleet Lane. Old Jeremy then conducted the Hangman to a bedroom, and having seen

him commence his preparations for retiring to rest, he went back to the laboratory in order to rejoin his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak.

As soon as the Hangman found himself alone, he stopped in the midst of taking off his garments, and sitting down upon the truckle-bedstead in the sordid little chamber to which he had been conducted, began meditating very seriously upon the circumstances of his position. His guilty conscience was naturally prone to conjure up a thousand terrors akin to those which had arisen in his mind while alone at Taggarty's, but which had been allayed, or, at all events, temporarily absorbed, by the excitement of the walk from Mutton Hill to Whitechapel, and also so long as he was in the society of his mistress, Sally Melmoth. But now that he was plunged into the solitude of this miserable chamber, without a soul to speak to, and without even a drop of spirits to give him an artificial stimulant, he rapidly fell into despondency, and a myriad phantoms of evil rose up in his active imagination.

What if Sally Melmoth was to betray him? She had hitherto been faithful to him for some years and through many vicissitudes; but he had frequently made her the victim of his brutality, and when anything thwarted him, had vented his spite upon her. Then her brother Dick, too, had also been compelled to put up with his coarse invectives, and even with his blows; and being of so treacherous and vindictive a character himself, the Hangman naturally dreaded to find treachery and revenge in others. He had a considerable sum of money concealed at his house in Fleet Lane, and though he had ever most studiously avoided giving any hint either to his mistress or her brother of this circumstance, yet they must know that he had money, the proceeds of the many desperate but lucrative matters in which he had been engaged, and what if they were, under present circumstances, to institute a search for it, now that he was compelled to absent himself from his dwelling?

These reflections began to torture the Hangman most poignantly, most goadingly, and in the solitude of that little chamber, he clenched his fist and gnashed his teeth with rage. Then he endeavoured to console himself, as men will do in such cases, by conjuring up every argument he could possibly think of in favour of the fidelity of Sally Melmoth

and her brother. On former occasions when he had been in trouble, were they not always faithful? And on this present occasion had not Sally Melmoth done her best to seek him out at Jacob's Island and give him timely warning? And had she not wept, too, just now in his presence? Ah! all that was well and good, but the Hangman felt that he also would play the hypocrite where he meant to become the traitor, and that he would lull into a false security any individual whom he intended to make a victim.

Now that his fears were so terribly active, they speedily took a wider range, and he thought to himself that even if Sally Melmoth and her brother Dick should prove faithful, what guarantee had he for similar fidelity on the part of Jeremy Humpage?

" The old villain," said the Hangman to himself, " knows that it is all up with me now, so far as continuing in London is concerned. He is aware that I can never be of any service to him again, and that I shall bring nothing more to his melting-pot. Then, what regard can he have for me? Everybody knows that these cursed old fences are the most treacherous scoundrels in existence, and often send their pals, when completely done up and no longer useful, to the scaffold, just as a landowner sends his worn-out labourers to the workhouse. Besides, when I come to think of it, what possible fear can old Jeremy stand in of me? If he gave me up to justice and I was to turn around upon him, denouncing him as an old fence, I should only be telling what Larry Sampson and every constable in London know very well already. But the proof, ay, the proof, that's it. For to show that he is a receiver of stolen goods, something that has been stolen must be found on his premises. Of course old Jeremy knows all this, and is well aware that he is not in my power. He is too wide awake to be in the power of anybody. Then why shouldn't he give me up? He is endangering himself by letting me stay here. This really would put him in the reach of the law. There's another thing, too. Perhaps old Jeremy wouldn't mind propitiating Larry Sampson by such an important service as handing me over to his keeping. Yes, by Satan! I am surrounded by dangers. In fact, I feel as if my case was desperate; it's a sort of crisis, I know it is, I am sure of it. Was there ever a fellow who had done such things as I have that didn't get

sold by his friends at last, either by his mistress or his pals? And there is Bill Taggarty, too, he knows that I am here, and he is such a miserable, sneaking coward that if it was known I had been to his place at all, and Larry Sampson went and questioned him about it, he is just as likely as not to let the cat out of the bag at once and send Larry down here to look for me. Malediction! I can't stay here, and yet where the deuce am I to go, with scarcely any money in my pocket?"

From these reflections which the Hangman made to himself, the reader will comprehend the troubled state of his mind. It was therefore utterly impossible that he could lie down quietly and think of composing himself to rest. He suffered no remorse on account of his crimes, no, not even for that blackest one of all, the consequences of which had gathered the present storm over his head. But if he knew not the compunction of his tremendous guilt, he at all events experienced its terrors, and now was he chafing in that little chamber like a wounded lion in its den.

Suddenly an idea struck him, an idea which was but too consonant with the desperate character of this fiend in human shape. What if he were to lay violent hands upon Humpage, ransack the old man's coffers, take possession of everything in the shape of money or valuables which he could find, disguise himself in some of the clothing from the establishment's ample store, and then sally forth, even in the broad daylight, in the hope of escaping safe and sound out of the metropolis? For it was broad daylight now.

This plan the public executioner speedily fixed upon, but ere he stole forth from his chamber, he lingered to settle beforehand the mode of procedure. He knew that the old housekeeper was ordinarily the only inmate of the dwelling besides Humpage himself, and he thought it would be better to dispose of her first ere he carried his fearful scheme into execution against her master. He had murderous weapons about him, more than sufficient to enable him to overcome a decrepit old woman and an aged man, even if he found them both awake in their respective chambers and they were to offer resistance; he had his crowbar, his clasp-knife, and his pistols. But the puzzle was, where were those chambers? How could he find out in which room the housekeeper slept, and in which Jeremy Humpage? If he went

wandering about the dwelling at a venture, he might be seen, his design would be suspected, windows might be thrown up and an alarm raised, before he could possibly silence the two old people for ever. How, then, was he to proceed?

"Trust to the chapter of accidents," said the Hangman to himself, "for I can't very well make my position more desperate than it is, whereas I may contrive to improve it."

The villain! Though now menaced by all the frightful consequences of murder, he hoped to improve his condition by other murders.

The morning, as we have already hinted, had fully dawned, and it was quite light inside his chamber. His countenance had a more than usually horrible appearance. It was ghastly with the terrors that he had so recently been conjuring up, and by the evil passions which were agitating in his mind. This ghastliness was enhanced by the unshorn condition of his beard, which blackened all the lower part of his countenance, while a sinister light, such as that of the reptile, vibrated in his eyes, gleaming from beneath his dark, overhanging brows. Taking the pistols from his pocket, he assured himself that they were loaded, and put fresh priming in the pan of each. Having restored them to his capacious pockets, he took out his clasp-knife, opened it, and tried the point. Then did a grim smile of terrible satisfaction appear upon his features, and as he raised his eyes he caught the reflection of himself in a little mirror suspended to the wall. The man actually started, as if that mirror were a window through which a fiend was looking in upon him, for he never felt, vile as he knew his aspect to be, that it was so utterly diabolical as at that moment.

His plan being settled, his mind made up, and his weapons duly prepared for any emergency, he took off his great clumsy lace-up boots, and opened the door with the noiselessness of an accomplished burglar. The passage with which the chamber communicated was lighted by a window at the end, and Coffin perceived that four doors opened from it, of which that of his own chamber was one. A dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling, or, at least, no sound of any kind met his ears. Stealing out into the passage, the Hangman tried the door of the chamber adjoining his own. It opened, he looked in, but no one was there. It at

once struck him that this must be old Humpage's room, for there were several articles of clothing lying about, evidently belonging to him. But the bed had not been slept in all night. Perhaps the old man had for some reason sought another chamber, and yet the executioner could not exactly settle his mind to this belief, for his keen eye caught sight of a nightshirt and cotton nightcap lying at the foot of the bed, as if in readiness for their owner's use. Without, however, pausing to reflect much longer upon the matter, Coffin was about to issue forth and examine the other chambers, when his acute ear suddenly caught the sounds of footsteps advancing, as if with tiptoe caution, along the passage. Not a moment did he deliberate how to act, but at once concealed himself under the bed, for he thought it best to ascertain if possible who were about the house at that hour, ere he made any attempt in pursuance of his murderous purpose.

Scarcely was he ensconced underneath the bed when the door, which he had left ajar, was opened, and two persons (as he judged by their footsteps) entered the room. Still as death he lay in his place of concealment, and when the two individuals who had thus entered began to converse, although it was in low whispers, he nevertheless had not the slightest difficulty in recognizing the voices of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HANGMAN'S PROCEEDINGS

It appeared to the public executioner that he heard one of the individuals put a key in a lock and open a door which grated on its hinges. His supposition was correct. It was Jeremy Humpage opening an iron safe, which was let into the wall of his bedchamber.

"Well, my dear friend," said the old man, in his nervous, trembling voice, "since we have agreed upon the value of the swag, all I have got to do is to give you your share. Thirds, you know, you take thirds in these matters."

"That's right enough," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, "as a general rule, but —"

"Dear me, my worthy and excellent friend," interrupted old Jeremy, "pray don't look discontented. You can't conceive how I hate the word 'but.' Besides, I thought just now, before we left the secret room, that you were quite contented to take your usual share of the value of all that plate?"

"Well, but this job is different from the rest," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a tone of remonstrance. "Recollect —"

"Hush, hush, my dear friend!" said Jeremy Humpage. "Bear in mind, I told you that scoundrel Coffin is in the next room to this, and as he mightn't be asleep, it is possible he may hear us. Speak low, therefore, speak low. He's deuced suspicious."

"Well," resumed the other fence, "as I was going to observe, you should recollect that this is the largest and best business I have ever put in your way yet, long as we have been connected together. Here's a matter of at least four hundred pound worth of plate that you gave sixty pound

for; and now that it's all gone nice and comfortable through the melting-pot, and you are safe to sell the lump of silver in Holland for three hundred pound —"

"Granted, granted!" interrupted old Jeremy, with some little degree of impatience. "So, deducting the sixty that I gave for it, we will reckon the gain to be two hundred and forty, the third of which is exactly eighty pounds, and that is what I am going to give you —"

"You ought to make it a hundred, a cool hundred," interrupted the Swag Chovey Bloak, "and then I shall be quite satisfied."

"Say ninety, and it shall be a bargain," whispered old Humpage, his words hissing like a hideous reptile. "Only think, my dear friend, ninety pounds in good gold and bank-notes! And you to have it all at once, while I have got to wait till my agent Bekerlynck at The Hague disposes of the lump of silver and remits me the proceeds."

"Well, come, we won't stand haggling here," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a somewhat surly tone. "The morning is advancing, and, besides, you know where I have got to go and what I have got to do."

"Yes, yes," observed Jeremy Humpage, in a chuckling manner, although he still continued to speak in a low whisper. "We must say another word or two upon that. But first of all, take your money. Here's six tens, that's sixty; here's a twenty, that's eighty; and here's ten good gold sovereigns as ever were coined. Look at it all, — ninety pounds! Isn't it a sum to part with? But now put it up safe in your pocket, and just take a towel and smear your face. It's rather blackened by bending over the furnace for so many hours."

Here the Hangman heard the sounds of a basin and jug rattling and water pouring out, so that he had no difficulty in understanding, in his place of concealment, that the Swag Chovey Bloak had followed old Jeremy's advice and was performing his ablutions. Meanwhile Daniel Coffin thought to himself, "It's a precious piece of good luck that put me in the way of finding out where old Jeremy's iron safe is, and also gave me a hint about the lump of silver these rascals have been talking of. But I will be bound to say that instead of Mr. Jeremy Humpage sending it over to Mynheer Bekerlynck of The Hague to sell for him, it's Mr.

Daniel Coffin that will call in person upon the said Mynheer Bekerlynck and get him to dispose of the said lump of silver then and there."

By the time the Hangman had made an end of his reflections, the Swag Chovey Bloak had likewise finished his ablutions, Jeremy Humpage having in the interval relocked the iron safe.

"Now what is it that you have got to say to me about that there scoundrel?" asked the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a cautious whisper. "Have you made up your mind about him?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" was the response, given in a low but quaking, quivering tone, as if the old man had resolved upon the performance of something which he nevertheless trembled to think of. "Larry Sampson and his people are sure, somehow or another, to trace the fellow to my house, and what will become of me if I am caught harbouring a murderer? There will be a hue and cry presently, handbills printed, placards posted, and perhaps rewards offered, so that when once all this is done I can't possibly pretend to remain ignorant of the fellow's crime any longer. Besides, why should he be here at all, if not to conceal himself from pursuit? And therefore you see, my worthy friend, that if I do continue to harbour him I shall be taken up as an accessory after the fact. This will never, never do."

"To be sure not," responded the Swag Chovey Bloak, "and therefore, all things considered, you do well to give him up. So, as there is no time to be lost, I will just trudge along to Larry Sampson's and give him the proper information."

"But mind you tell him I sent you, mind you don't forget that," urged old Jeremy. "It's of the highest importance."

"Don't be afraid; I sha'n't forget it," returned the other fence. "In less than a couple of hours you may rely upon seeing Larry down here with a lot of his people. But I say, by the bye," added the Swag Chovey Bloak, "there is no chance of his searching your premises, is there?"

"Who search the premises?" asked old Jeremy.

"Why, Larry Sampson, to be sure," was the response. "Coming to arrest a murderer, don't you think he may take it into his head to have a look all over the house?"

"And if he did," interrupted old Jeremy Humpage, "you

don't think for a moment that with all his keen scent and eagle eyes Larry Sampson could find the secret door in the passage overhead? No, no; it's a precious deal too well hidden. Doesn't it fit into the wainscot just as if it wasn't a door at all? And who would think for a moment, when visiting the two chambers on the right hand in that passage, that there was another room lying between them? No, no, my excellent friend, there is not the slightest chance of Larry poking his nose into the secret crib there and finding the lump of silver in the melting-pot. Besides," added old Jeremy, in a more serious tone, for he had been chuckling with a sort of triumphant garrulity while previously speaking, " there will be no searching of the premises at all. To search one's premises is to treat one as an accomplice of the criminal who is arrested, but as it's me myself that sends up the information, through you, to Larry Sampson, he can't possibly treat me as an accomplice."

" Well, well, you know best," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak, " and if you are satisfied, I am sure I am. For my part, I sha'n't be at all sorry to see the Hangman hung up himself. I never liked him. Besides, he's done for now, and useless to us. He will never put no more things in our way, and therefore the sooner he's got rid of the better."

" Yes, yes, that's exactly my opinion," said Humpage. " And now let's waste no more time in words, but you be off at once to Larry Sampson's."

" I shall go straight there," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak. " It's now half-past three o'clock. By half-past five, at latest, Larry and his men will be down here. I suppose you will sit up for them."

" Yes, yes," responded Humpage, in a shaking, quivering whisper. " I am in no humour to sleep, not a bit of it. So, when you are gone, I shall wait with anxiety till Sampson and the runners come."

" Now, then, I will be off." And with these words, the Swag Chovey Bloak moved upon tiptoe toward the door of the chamber, followed by old Humpage, who went to let him out of the house.

When they had issued from the room, Daniel Coffin lay still underneath the bed until the sounds of their retreating footsteps were no longer audible, and then he crept forth from his hiding-place. The expression of his countenance

was even more diabolic than when he had been startled by catching the reflection of his features in the looking-glass. With all the concentrated rage of a fiend, he was panting for revenge. His worst fears were confirmed, Humpage meant to betray him, and now he actually yearned to imbrue his hands in the old man's blood.

"In two hours Larry Sampson and his men will be here, eh?" he muttered to himself. "But by that time I shall be far away. Two hours, indeed! Ten minutes are now enough for the work that I have got to do. I am almost sorry I let that old scoundrel, the Swag Chovey Bloak, get off so easy, but it wouldn't have done to reveal myself from under the bed. At the first appearance of my precious countenance peeping forth, they would have raised an alarm before I could have knocked either of them on the head, the old housekeeper would have heard their cries, and the game would have been up with me. But as it is, I am right enough now."

Such were the Hangman's musings as he concealed himself behind one of the bed-curtains. He felt pretty well assured that old Jeremy Humpage would return to his chamber, either to lie down and rest, or else to wash himself, for it was quite evident that he had been up all night in company with the Swag Chovey Bloak, and engaged in the pleasing occupation of melting down four hundred pounds' worth of silver plate.

The Hangman's conjecture was correct relative to the return of old Jeremy Humpage to the chamber, so soon as he had shown his brother fence out of the house. Still and motionless as a statue behind the curtain, Daniel Coffin listened with breathless attention, and in the course of a few minutes he heard the old man's stealthy steps approaching along the passage.

"He walks as if he was treading on eggs," said the Hangman to himself. "That's because he's afraid of disturbing me, but I think it's a deuced deal more likely that I shall disturb him in a minute or two."

As the monster thus mused internally, he drew forth his terrible clasp-knife, and opened the blade, which, by means of a spring or catch, remained fixed, rendering the weapon as serviceably formidable as a stiletto.

Jeremy Humpage entered the chamber very noiselessly,

shut the door, and locked it. He then approached the washing-stand, threw off his coat, and prepared to commence his ablutions. From behind the curtain Daniel Coffin watched his movements, and presently he beheld the old man bend over the basin to bathe his face with a sponge. Now was the moment! Grasping his dagger-knife firmly in his right hand, the Hangman slipped from behind the curtain, one stride took him within reach of his victim, and then, with a tremendous blow, the stiletto was driven deep down between the old man's shoulders. A cry, but not a loud one, burst from the lips of Jeremy Humpage, and he rolled down upon the floor, a corpse.

The murderer, without the slightest remorse for the crime he had just committed, proceeded to rifle the pockets of his victim, and thence he took what money they contained, as well as a bunch of keys.

One of these fitted the safe, in which the Hangman found gold and bank-notes to the amount of about five hundred pounds, as nearly as he could guess at the quick glance he threw over the treasure. But he had no time to waste, for he did not fail to recollect that the Swag Chovey Bloak was on his way to Larry Sampson's.

Having secured the gold and notes about his person, the Hangman was on the point of retreating from the room when he suddenly recollected that his clasp-knife might prove serviceable in case of any danger he should have to encounter elsewhere. He accordingly drew it forth from the body of his victim, wiped it upon a towel, closed the blade, and put it into his pocket. He then unlocked the door, and was issuing forth from the chamber when, in the passage, he found himself face to face with the old housekeeper, who, knowing that her master had purposed to sit up all night, had risen and dressed herself to get him some breakfast.

The woman, although she knew Daniel Coffin well, and was aware that he transacted business with Humpage, was nevertheless amazed and terrified to behold him there at such an hour, especially as he was stealing forth from old Jeremy's chamber, for she was not aware that he had arrived at the house at all, and that he had been admitted by her master himself while she slept. Besides, his looks were now so full of a diabolic expression that his aspect alone at

this moment, apart from all other circumstances, would have been enough to terrify her. A scream thrilled from her lips, but even while it was yet vibrating upon the air, the Hangman sprang at her with the force and fury of a wild beast, clutched her by the throat, stifled all further power of utterance, and flinging her upon the floor of the passage, placed his knee upon her chest. In this manner he held her tight until she grew black in the face, her features became convulsed and livid, and she was suffocated.

Even after her body had ceased to writhe and convulse, and when there was every evidence that the vital spark had fled, the ferocious Hangman still kept his hands upon her neck, the fingers literally digging deep down into her flesh, so as to assure himself that she was indeed no more. Then he rose up, and without loss of time ascended the stairs to the passage above. That the secret room, where the lump of silver was contained, lay between the two chambers on the right hand side of that passage, he had gleaned from the conversation of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak. It was therefore by no means difficult to ascertain exactly where the laboratory was situated, but the puzzling part of the business was to discover how to open the door. The Hangman rapped with his knuckles upon all parts of the wainscot where he conceived that this door ought to be, but he could not tell by the sound where it was. Five minutes were thus lost, and he grew impatient. Still he made another trial, curbing his feelings as well as he was able, and continuing his investigation with all possible carefulness, but another five minutes passed without any better success. Now he grew fearfully impatient, terribly exasperated. Time was so precious to him!

Already had near half an hour elapsed since the departure of the Swag Chovey Bloak, and there was not a minute to waste unnecessarily. What should he do? He would procure a hatchet and break down the whole of the wainscoting in that part of the passage, so as to find the door. But what if there were no hatchet to be found? And nothing else would serve his purpose, for the woodwork was evidently very thick and solid, the better to conceal the existence of the secret door. He must curb his impatience once more, and give another trial. That there was some secret spring he felt convinced, and this must be felt for. Still more care-

fully than hitherto did he renew his investigation, and, ah! this time he is successful. He has touched something, he scarcely knows what, he does not pause to look. It is sufficient for him that the door suddenly flies open, and, with an exclamation of delight, he rushes into the laboratory.

But as he thus springs across the threshold, the door shuts of its own accord behind him.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CORPSE — THE SECRET CHAMBER

We must now go back for a few hours, in order to give some necessary explanations. The Buttoner, as the reader may already have understood, was indeed profoundly stricken with remorse for the share he had taken in the murder of Nell Gibson. Since the perpetration of that crime, many months back, he had become altogether an altered being, abandoning his old companions, wandering about the country, desolate and miserable, like a lost and starved dog, and not having even the spirit to follow his wonted avocations of thimble-rigging in order to procure his bread. The image of Nell Gibson never ceased to haunt him. It followed him about by day, it stood by him at night, wherever he lay down to rest. At length, so terrible became his thoughts, so deep his compunction, that he grew reckless of life; and in process of time the whispering of conscience suggested that the only means of procuring peace for his soul was to make an atonement by a full confession to the proper authorities.

In this mood had he returned to London, at the time of which we have been speaking in preceding chapters; and instinctively bending his way toward Mrs. Young's abode, the place where he had last dwelt in company with Nell Gibson, he chanced to meet old Mother Franklin in the immediate vicinage. To her he at once revealed the fate of the young woman, the remorse that he had experienced, and the determination to which he had come. It was while thus discoursing that they had been noticed and partially overheard by Bencull, as the reader has already seen. Fearing, therefore, that some suspicion of his intent might have been excited in the mind of that man, the Buttoner resolved

to lose no time in executing his project of atonement. He had accordingly proceeded at once, with old Mother Franklin, to Mrs. Young's abode, and to this woman did he repeat all that he had just been saying to Mother Franklin. Mrs. Young, fearful of being considered an accessory to the crime if she were to conceal her knowledge of it, now that in all its particulars it was fully made known to her, urged the Buttoner to accompany her without delay to Larry Sampson's house in Long Acre, and thither did they accordingly proceed together. On arriving at the officer's dwelling, they learned that he was not at home, but would return shortly. Mrs. Young thereupon asked Dame Margery, Mr. Sampson's housekeeper, to furnish them with writing materials, and this being done, Mrs. Young penned a hasty but explicit narrative, containing the requisite particulars, and also a statement to the effect that the Buttoner would remain at her house, ready to surrender himself up whenever Sampson might choose to come and fetch him. To this document she made the Buttoner append his name, and having sealed it, she left it with Dame Margery, to be given to Mr. Sampson the instant he should return home.

This being done, the Buttoner felt somewhat more easy in his mind; and as he accompanied Mrs. Young back to her abode at Bermondsey, he did not once appear to regret the step he had taken. On reaching the house, Mother Franklin, as already described, hurried out into the passage to give them the whispered intimation that Daniel Coffin was in the parlour, and that he evidently suspected what was going on. Therefore was it that when the Hangman endeavoured to escape abruptly from the place, the Buttoner opposed his departure, and then followed the conflict in the passage which we have already described. The public executioner managed to get clear off, but before he thus fled, he committed sad havoc amongst his assailants. Old Mother Franklin was so severely trampled under his feet that she was subsequently carried, in a dying state, up to the attic which she occupied; and the Buttoner had received so severe a blow on the head from the iron heel of Daniel Coffin's great thick boot that he also was left in a very dangerous predicament. Mrs. Young had an arm broken by the poker which she herself had first taken as a weapon of attack, but which the Hangman had wrenched from her hands. Two of the frail

young women dwelling in her house likewise had bones broken, and a third daughter of crime was most severely injured, all by the random blows which Daniel Coffin had struck with the formidable weapon.

Soon afterward Lawrence Sampson and several of his men arrived at the house, and received from the Buttoner's lips a full confirmation of the tale which had been recorded in the document drawn up by Mrs. Young. He had but just strength enough to repeat the particulars, and the surgeon who had been summoned to attend on the wounded at Mrs. Young's house declared that the Buttoner could not be removed for a day or two. A Bow Street runner was accordingly left to keep watch upon him, while Larry Sampson and the rest of his men proceeded to Jacob's Island to arrest Bencull. As the reader has already been informed, the Mushroom Faker and the Durrynacker were captured at the same time with Bencull himself, but the Hangman had evaded the search of the officers of justice.

Soon after it was daylight in the morning, — that same Sabbath morning, be it recollected, which was marked by the horrible crimes of Daniel Coffin at the abode of Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel, — several persons made their appearance with drags at the Folly Bridges to fish for the corpse of the murdered Nell Gibson. This proceeding naturally excited an immense sensation at Jacob's Island, and in a very few minutes after the rumour had circulated for what purpose the men were come, the windows of all the dingy, dilapidated houses overlooking the black ditch on both sides were crowded, even at that early hour, with anxious faces. A glance thrown around upon those countenances so marked with the traces of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization would have afforded a perfect index to the condition of that neighbourhood, as if to the reading of the hidden pages of a volume filled with obscenities, vices, and horrors. The men, however, who had come to drag the dike took no such philosophic view of the scene, but addressed themselves in right good earnest to the loathsome task which they were there to fulfil.

On each of the bridges did two of these men begin to drag, and, at first, innumerable were the rotting remains of cats and dogs that the drags brought up from the thick, slimy ditch. All kinds of filth, offal, and garbage were thus dis-

turbed, and either brought up to the surface or dragged to land, and the effluvium which the troubled dike now exhaled was nauseating to a degree. Yet that was the water, or, rather, the liquid slime, which the inhabitants of Jacob's Island had to drink and to use for all purposes of cookery or ablution, thus imbibing the seeds of disease and death from that fetid, stagnant ditch which served alike as their cistern and their sewer. Such was it at the period of which we are writing, and such is it at the present day. And then, forsooth, we are coolly told, and, what is more, expected to believe, that the poor are cared for by the rich, and that the wretched inmates of squalid hovels, breathing the atmosphere of pestilence and death, are an object of sympathy with the wealthy and the proud ones who roll in their carriages, sleep upon down, dress in fine garments, and eat off plate of silver and of gold.

But to continue our narrative. After having dragged the ditch for some time without any success, the men whom Larry Sampson had sent thither for the purpose began to think that the corpse for which they were seeking must have been carried into the Thames on some occasion when the sluice-gate was open. But the experience of one who was better acquainted than the rest with Jacob's Island suggested that it was far more likely the corpse was deeply embedded in the mud. The men therefore attached weights to their drags, in order to make the hooks sink deep down into the slimy bed of the dike, and the result of this new experiment speedily proved successful. To be brief, the half-decomposed corpse of a female was presently dragged up from the muddy depths, and deposited upon the bridge where the men who experienced this success were stationed. We will not shock the reader by pausing to describe the loathsome appearance which the once handsome and well-formed young woman now presented to the eye. Let it be sufficient to state that the spectacle was so revolting as to fill with horror the minds of even the callous and hardened denizens of Jacob's Island.

The corpse was conveyed into Bencull's now deserted crib, there to await the coroner's inquest which would be holden upon it in due course, and one of the men who had fished up the body was left in charge of it. That is to say, he locked up all the doors of the house and remained watching

outside, for the object was too loathsome in every respect for the individual to stay inside the place along with it.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson rose very early on this same morning, for he was resolved to adopt all possible measures for the arrest of Daniel Coffin. Scarcely had the officer dressed himself and taken a mouthful of breakfast, when he received intelligence that the corpse of the murdered woman had been found, and very soon afterward, the Swag Chovey Bloak called to inform him that the Hangman was at Jeremy's Humpage's house. Of course the fence made Sampson understand that old Humpage had not voluntarily secreted the criminal, but that he had forced himself into that asylum. The Bow Street officer accordingly lost no time in repairing with half a dozen of his men to the very midst of that morass of wretchedness and demoralization bearing the name of Whitechapel, and on reaching the street where Humpage's establishment was situated, Larry Sampson disposed of his subordinates in such a manner that they might anticipate any attempt at escape on the part of the Hangman should he take the alarm before his capture could be accomplished. Two men were left to watch in the street; two were sent around to obtain admission into one of the houses the back windows of which overlooked the yard in the rear of Humpage's establishment; and when these dispositions were made, Larry Sampson, attended by his two remaining followers, knocked at the front door of the habitation.

Several minutes elapsed, and the summons received no answer. Sampson now suspected that something was wrong, and, without waiting to repeat that summons, he at once ordered an entry to be effected by breaking open the shutters of one of the windows on the ground floor. This was speedily done, and the officer, with a loaded pistol in his hand, was the first to enter the house, his two comrades following close behind. They were now in one of the spacious warerooms of the establishment, and having assured themselves that no one was concealed in that part of the premises, they forced open the door, which was always carefully locked at night, and thus effected an entry into the passage on the ground floor. All the lower part of the house being searched in vain, they ascended to the first story, and there, in the middle of the passage, they discovered the corpse of

the housekeeper. The old woman was quite dead, and the fearful marks upon her neck, as well as the hideous distortion of her countenance, showed at once by what means her murder had been accomplished. The discovery of old Jeremy's body in the bedchamber followed next, and the open door of the safe proved that robbery had accompanied murder.

That all these crimes were the horrible work of the Hangman there could not be the slightest doubt, and that he had saved himself by flight was naturally conceived. Nevertheless, Larry Sampson instituted the strictest search throughout the establishment; every apartment was entered, save and excepting that secret room which served as the laboratory for the murdered fence.

Without entertaining the slightest suspicion that there was such a place within those walls, Larry Sampson and his two men issued forth again from the house, but in so doing they perceived that the street door was bolted and chained inside. It was therefore clear enough that the Hangman had not quitted the premises by this means of egress, and inasmuch as throughout the search just concluded no open window nor other indication of flight had met the officer's notice, Larry resolved to go over the entire establishment once more. This he did without discovering the slightest clue which to his experienced eye could afford an indication of the course taken by the murderer when he quitted the house. Was it possible that the Hangman had still remained concealed somewhere upon the premises? Sampson scarcely thought it likely, and yet he did not feel justified in abandoning the search as yet.

Leaving the two men who were with him to keep watch inside the house, Larry Sampson proceeded around to that dwelling where two others of his men had obtained admission in order to watch from the back windows, and from that point where they were already posted did Larry Sampson now survey all the back part of Humpage's establishment. His keen eye very soon observed that there was one window on the second story which was boarded up, and painted in such a manner as to have the appearance of being uniform with the dingy brickwork itself, so as to conceal the existence of a window there altogether. Sampson's attention was first drawn to this contrivance by the appearance of two small dark spots which struck him to be intended as air-holes,

and on a more scrutinizing survey he was enabled to trace the outlines of the shutters that blocked up the window. He then studied the exact position of this concealed window in reference to the adjacent ones on the same floor, and with all these facts well arranged in his clear and comprehensive mind, he hastened back again to the scene of the double murder.

On rejoining his two followers whom he had left in charge of the establishment, he told them what he had seen, intimating his suspicion that there was some hidden nook, closet, or chamber in the house which had hitherto escaped their investigation. To the second floor did they accordingly reascend, and proceeded to examine the two chambers between which the laboratory was situated. Now that they were on the right scent, and that their suspicions were directed in the proper channel, it was not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that between the two chambers there was quite sufficient room for a smaller one. Their next step was to examine the woodwork in the passage, but there they discovered no indication of a door. Of course Larry Sampson was not to be baffled. He felt assured that though he perceived not the slightest sign of a door, he was nevertheless standing upon the threshold of an important discovery. He therefore despatched one of his men to fetch the nearest carpenter in the neighbourhood, or, at all events, to borrow a hatchet and the other necessary implements for breaking down the wainscot of the passage.

In about a quarter of an hour the runner returned, accompanied by a carpenter with his basket of tools at his back. The work of demolition then commenced, and in a very few minutes it became apparent enough that there was really a door, most curiously contrived and admirably concealed, in that place. But even before it was completely broken down, and also before the woodwork was perforated in such a way as to afford a glimpse of the interior of the laboratory, the carpenter's hatchet suddenly struck upon the hidden spring, and the door opened of its own accord.

Then did a terrible malediction, accompanied by a ferocious howl like that of a wild beast, burst forth from the interior of the hidden chamber, hidden now no longer, and Larry Sampson coolly observed, "It is he."

The next instant the Hangman, holding a loaded pistol in each hand, and his crowbar between his teeth, sprang forth, as if the same wild beast that had given the savage growl was now desperately turning upon its enemies. One of his weapons, aimed pointblank at Larry Sampson, fortunately flashed in the pan; the other, levelled at the carpenter, missed him by a hair's breadth and lodged its bullet in the wainscot facing the door of the laboratory. Then, ere he had time to make any further attempt at resistance, or to achieve any real mischief, the ruffian, strong in his maddened fury though he were, was seized upon by the two runners and the carpenter, this last-mentioned individual threatening to strike him down with his hatchet if he did not surrender. At the same time Larry Sampson, utterly undismayed by the narrow escape his own life had just experienced, pointed a pistol toward the Hangman's head, saying, with his wonted phlegmatic coolness, "If you resist any further, you are a dead man."

It would be impossible to describe the horrible expression of rage and hate which now fastened, as it were, upon Daniel Coffin's countenance, nor shall we sully our pages by recording the diabolic imprecation which rolled forth in a deep growl from his lips. Perceiving that resistance was indeed futile, he submitted to have the fetters and manacles, wherewith the Bow Street runners were ever provided, fastened upon his limbs, and then, so soon as he felt himself utterly powerless, he sank into a mood of dogged and ferocious sullenness. A hackney-coach was speedily fetched, and the formidable Daniel Coffin was conveyed to a place of security.

One word of explanation relative to a particular incident, ere we conclude this chapter. The reader will remember that when the Hangman had discovered the secret spring, and had rushed with a joy so wildly exultant into the laboratory, the door had closed of its own accord behind him. This circumstance did not at the first moment trouble him at all, nor even attract his notice. His eye had caught sight of the huge lump of silver in the melting-pot, and all his thoughts were concentrated in the task of enveloping the treasure in his handkerchief and securing it about his person. But this done, he suddenly became aware of the horrifying fact that he was a prisoner. Vainly did he

search for the secret spring; he could not find it. Then he attempted to break the door open with his crowbar, but its strength resisted all his endeavours. In short, wearied with ineffectual exertions, and thrown into a terrific fever-heat by his maddened endeavours to break loose, he had sat down to recruit his strength, when it struck him that the best course to adopt was to remain quiet and trust to the place of his concealment remaining undiscovered when the house should be searched. This he did, and the reader has already seen the result.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DESERTED MISTRESS

It was about nine o'clock in the morning, and Penelope Arbuthnot was seated in her own chamber at Windsor Castle, gazing through the open casement upon the beautiful view which the window commanded. The maid of honour — a maid only in name, and not in reality — was loosely apparelled in an elegant morning wrapper. She had not long risen from her couch. Her hair was but negligently gathered up, no advance had been made in her toilet beyond the wonted ablutions, and the wrapper had been so carelessly flung on that it displayed more than it concealed of the lady's voluptuous charms. But then, she was alone, and, moreover, her thoughts were too deeply occupied to allow her to observe the seminudity of her person.

The casement was, as we have said, open, but on the broad ledge an array of flowers formed a beautiful screen to veil Penelope from the look of any one who might have been walking in the grounds upon which the window looked. The breeze, soft, and genial, and warm with the sun of August, fanned her somewhat flushed cheeks, and played with a refreshing influence upon her heated brow; while the flowers, alike in the window and on the parterres of the garden below, loaded the air with a delicious fragrance which was wafted all around her.

We have said upon a former occasion that Penelope was not exactly beautiful, nor could she be called positively handsome, but she was a fine, full-grown young woman, with a figure nobly developed, and endowed with the most voluptuous charms, blending the noble height of Diana with the exuberant contours of a Hebe. Then her large bright eyes and a pair of luscious red lips gave animation

to her countenance, her smile in her gay moments was sweet, but with an expression of soft sensuousness, and sweeter still when expanding so as to reveal the teeth of ivory whiteness. Although her person was upon a large scale and her limbs were robust and massive, yet were they symmetrically sculptured, with due fineness in the hands, the taper fingers, the rounded ankles, and the long narrow feet. Thus, altogether, Penelope Arbuthnot was well calculated to be admired, even amidst a throng of court beauties, and she was of that voluptuous figure and also of that age, being twenty-six, which were especially pleasing to the prince regent.

That she had become the mistress of his Royal Highness some five months previously to the date of which we are at present writing, the reader is well aware. How is it, then, that she looks mournful and unhappy now? Does she regret the surrender of her person to the prince? Did she feel no gratification in thus acquiring that favour which so many higher-born damsels panted for in vain? Or has she already experienced some treatment on the part of her royal paramour to produce this depression of spirits?

In the midst of her reverie the door of the chamber opened, and her mother entered the room. It was a look of almost hatred which Penelope flung toward her parent, as the opening and closing of the door suddenly startled the young lady from her profound meditation.

" My dear child," began Mrs. Arbuthnot, as she advanced, in a coaxing manner, toward her daughter, " how is it that I find you in this moping mood? "

" Mother," cried Penelope, rising to her feet and looking sternly upon her parent, " how is it possible you can ask me this question, when you yourself ought to be able to solve the enigma, if such it be to you? "

" I suppose, my dear," said the bedchamber woman, for such was Mrs. Arbuthnot in the queen's household, " I suppose that you have acquired the certainty as to your condition? "

" Yes," interrupted her daughter, bitterly. " I am indeed in a way to become a mother. And now will you tell me what name my child is to bear when it comes into the world? "

" You speak, Penelope, as if you were the only young lady

who had ever intrigued with a prince. If you had married a plain Mr. Smith or a humble Mr. Jones, your child would be called Thomas or Jane Smith, or Henry or Mary Jones, just as the circumstances of the sex might be, but as it is, the father of your child can make it a lord or a lady; and it is but to look over a list of the most high-sounding names and choose the one that pleases you best."

"Mother," answered Penelope, fixing a strange look upon her parent, while the colour suddenly fled from her cheeks, leaving them as pale as marble, "do you remember that when you first proposed to me that I should abandon myself to the prince, I bade you beware lest all this should teach me to despise and contemn, perhaps even hate, my own mother? Ah! I fear that that hour is now come; and assuredly, whatever feeling of bitterness I might have entertained toward you when you first entered the room ere now, it has been enhanced by the flippancy of your last observation."

"Flippancy, my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I was merely telling you the truth."

"Ah! but even allowing your words to be taken seriously," cried Penelope, "let us suppose that I had married a plain gentleman or an honest shopkeeper, would not my child have had an honourable name, and from its very birth the fond care of a father?"

"All this would be well enough," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a look very much resembling disgust, "if you were a young, sentimental girl of seventeen or eighteen, who had been seduced under very cruel circumstances by some treacherous admirer and under a promise of marriage. But really, as matters now stand, there is something too absurd in a young woman of your age, past six and twenty, and with the prince regent as your lover."

"Lover!" echoed Penelope, her looks again expressing a strange bitterness. "Do you call an ungrateful sensualist, an unfeeling profligate like that, a lover?"

"Penelope, there is something in your mind with which I am unacquainted," said her mother, now surveying her with a more fixed and earnest attention than at first. "What has occurred? Anything new, anything unpleasant?"

"Listen, mother, and I will tell you," replied Penelope, as she pointed to a chair, while she resumed her own at the

window. "You know that the prince regent paid a hurried visit to the castle last evening, to consult her Majesty upon something of importance."

"Yes, I am aware of it; and I presume that you are offended because his Royal Highness was too hurried and too anxious to get back to London to pass the night here, so that he might have been in your arms, or even to be able to snatch a short half-hour's conversation with you ere he went."

"You are wrong, mother, you are wrong," exclaimed Penelope. "The prince did snatch half an hour to speak to me alone last evening, and it is precisely in consequence of what then took place between us that you see me as I am this morning. But again I beg you to listen, — that is to say, if you indeed desire explanations from my lips?"

"I do; you must know I do," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, now displaying an evident anxiety, for she began to fear that something was wrong between her daughter and the prince. "Proceed, my dear child."

"I need scarcely remind you," continued Penelope, "that when first you proposed that I should become the mistress of the prince, I listened to you in amazement and in horror. But you told me a tale of pecuniary embarrassments, — which I have since discovered to be false, — and you used so much persuasion, that, in short, I knew not what to do unless it were to yield. And I did yield. Then, the barrier of virtue once broken down, I gave myself up to the enjoyments of sensual passion, and likewise to ambitious dreamings. The prince, every time he came to the castle, treated me with kindness, even with a show of affection; he gave me a few presents, as you are aware, and he made many brilliant promises. Three or four weeks ago I hinted to him my apprehension that the effects of our amour would in time become visible, but he did not seem to care much about the intelligence I thus imparted to his ear. Indeed, he received it with a kind of indifference, which struck me to be heartless and even cruel. But I dared not admit to myself that such was the case. I endeavoured to reason my mind out of that belief, and therefore was it that I kept my fears from you. But last evening I took the opportunity of whispering to the prince that I besought a few minutes interview with him, and he contrived that

it should take place previous to his departure. Then I assured him that what I had hinted at as a possibility a month back had now become a certainty. Oh, mother, I expected — no, I cannot say that I expected, for my mind had been previously haunted with sore misgivings on the subject, but I had hoped that his manner might change, and that when he learned that he was beyond all doubt to become the father of my child in due course, he would treat me with tenderness and affection. But, ah! if you had beheld the careless indifference, nay, even the coldness, with which he received my words — "

Here Penelope stopped suddenly short, and burst into tears.

"My dear child," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, now becoming frightened, "this in indeed serious. I had not anticipated such a thing."

"No, mother," exclaimed Penelope, bitterly, as she wiped away her tears, "I am well aware of all that has been passing in your mind. You have buoyed yourself up with the hope that the prince would provide brilliantly alike for me and the coming babe, and that in the splendour of the position to which he would raise me, my disgrace should be altogether absorbed. Judging by all he had done for Lady Sackville, you flattered yourself that he would make a peeress of me, bestow upon me a handsome pension, and by loading me with favours, make me the object of envy and adoration in the court circle, so that some proud nobleman would be glad to lay his coronet at my feet and sue for my hand. Yes, these have been your hopes, these have been your dreams. To this end have all your intrigues and machinations been directed."

"Penelope, you are right, you are right," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But do not tell me that my hopes are to be disappointed."

"They are, they are," rejoined her daughter, now greatly excited. "I tell you that I have no hold upon the prince's affections. I never had; it was as a toy and a plaything for the moment that I have served. He is sated with me, and he scarcely had the delicacy to conceal it."

"Oh, the ungrateful monster!" cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, now trembling with rage. Then the next moment she began to shed tears of vexation. "But perhaps he was in an angry

mood, Penelope? " she suddenly exclaimed. " Perhaps he had something to vex him? It is well known that he feels deeply the loss of Venetia."

" Yes, it is because he loves Venetia as much as a debauched sensualist like him can possibly love a woman otherwise than as the object of gross indulgence, it is because he loves her, I say," continued Penelope, with the emphasis of bitter vexation, " because he pines after her, because he yearns for her, that all his thoughts, all his sympathies, and all his longings are centred in her, and that he has no room in his heart for even the slightest feeling of pity on behalf of me! "

" But tell me what he said? How did he behave to you last evening? " inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, anxiously.

" Oh, it is useless to enter upon these details," exclaimed Penelope. " Suffice it to say that when I told him my position and besought his advice, he answered, with a cold indifference, that he had no doubt you would be able to manage the matter easily enough when the time came, that I must go into retirement for awhile, with leave of absence from court, and that if I wanted a few hundred pounds he dared say he should be able to spare them. Now, mother," asked Penelope, with a biting irony, " what becomes of your fine fabric of hope and ambition after all this? "

" Penelope, I am distressed beyond measure," answered her mother. " The prince's conduct is cruel and heartless to a degree. I had never a very high opinion of his character for generosity and honour, but I certainly did not expect that he would show such brutal callousness as this."

" Mother," rejoined Penelope, " you have sold me to a villain. Would it not have been better that I should have become the honoured wife even of a humble Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones? " and there was again a terrible irony in the young lady's words and a malicious fire in her eyes.

" Daughter, do not make things worse by showing a bad temper. Perhaps everything is not as bad as you fancy it. There is plenty of time before you. Months will elapse ere your condition will become visible, and in the meantime who knows how the prince's humour may change? He will altogether have forgotten his Venetia."

" Yes, and will have taken up with some other mistress,

equally brilliant, or if not so brilliant as Venetia, at all events sufficiently splendid to keep me altogether in the background."

"Do not give way to this despondency," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, determined to hope even until the very last. "We must think of what is to be done. I do not pretend for a moment that you are so beautiful as Lady Sackville, but you are nevertheless a very fine young woman, and it is impossible that the prince can remember your charms with indifference. I am really afraid, Penelope, that you yourself have not played your cards well, that you have not exerted all your powers of fascination, that you have not done your best to please and captivate the prince. Perhaps you have been cold."

"No, mother," answered the young lady, a crimson glow now mantling upon her cheeks, then rapidly suffusing itself over her neck and upon the luxuriant orbs of her heaving bosom, "when once the barrier of chastity was broken down, I surrendered myself up, as I have already told you, to the intoxicating delights of passion, and was a very wanton in the prince's arms. But even now, mother, you are labouring hard to deceive yourself. You are still striving to buoy yourself up with hope when there is none. I tell you that we shall obtain nothing from the prince. In short, I am a cast-off mistress, and oh, deep, deep is the humiliation."

As she gave utterance to these last words, all the glow of shame, which had risen to her cheeks and suffused her neck when she confessed herself a wanton, fled away, leaving her pale as marble, and her looks sank into the profoundest melancholy.

"It is awkward, awkward indeed," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, not knowing exactly what course to adopt.

"Awkward, mother! Is that the term to be applied to this cruel embarrassment?" suddenly exclaimed Penelope, raising her eyes and looking with mingled indignation and reproach in her parent's face. "May it not prove utterly ruinous? Think you not that it is generally suspected that I have been the prince's mistress? And so long as it is believed I am in high favour with him, the old queen herself will shut her eyes upon the amour, and the ladies of the court will pet, caress, and envy me. But the moment it is

known that the princely favour exists for me no longer, will not the queen be the very first to look coldly upon me, and will not her ladies treat me with scorn, mockery, and contempt? Yes, but even this is not all; the worst is behind. For if accident should reveal my position before I can obtain leave to go into retirement, shall I not be expelled ignominiously from the court, and would not you be involved in my ruin? Then what is to become of us? While we were poor, we always contrived to live somehow or another, because our characters were not gone, but if once thrown upon the world, with our reputations blasted, I as an unwedded mother, and you as the wretched, disappointed pander to your daughter's shame, who will take us by the hand, who will befriend us, what shall we do?"

But Mrs. Arbuthnot was not listening to the latter part of her daughter's speech. She had fallen into a deep reverie, and was revolving in her mind a variety of plans that suggested themselves as a means of encountering the present emergency. When Penelope had ceased speaking, she also sank into a meditative mood, and there was a long pause before either mother or daughter again broke silence.

"My dear child," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I have it, I have it! Depend upon it, I shall be enabled to bring the prince to reason, and make him do something for you."

"Anything, mother, so long as it will ensure our positions at court," cried Penelope, "and save me from disgrace. But what plan have you in your head?"

"Leave it to me, child, do not ask me any questions now. I must act, and not talk." Then, as she rose from her seat, she added, "Be of good cheer, I feel convinced that the prince regent will not only be brought to terms, but even perhaps be compelled to do more for us than we have ever anticipated. I am now going to London."

Penelope's curiosity was greatly excited, and her hopes were also revived by the tone of confidence in which her mother spoke, but Mrs. Arbuthnot would say no more at present, and again bidding her daughter be of good cheer, she quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CAPTAIN'S VISIT

It was between three and four in the afternoon of the same day, and the prince regent was seated alone at luncheon in one of the splendid apartments at Carlton House. His Royal Highness had been giving audience to Ministers and ambassadors during the early part of the day, and, much fatigued with the ceremonies, he was now refreshing himself with some luxurious viands and racy wines; but from time to time he made a movement of impatience, muttering half-aloud, "I wish to Heaven that Venetia were here!"

Having pushed away his plate, he threw himself back upon the sofa where he was seated, and as he continued to sip his wine, gave way to his reflections.

"Venetia has certainly abandoned me altogether. She will not come back; her husband has left me and has gone to join her. She is therefore lost to me for ever. Ah, who shall supply her place? Ernestina, who in voluptuous beauty of person came nearest to Venetia, is no more, and amidst the whole bevy of fair ones in whose arms I have already revelled, or who are ready to bestow their favours upon me if I say but the word, there is not one that can compare with Venetia, no, not one."

The prince regent was in a melancholy mood, and he felt that the wine did not inspire him with spirits. He wished for a companion at that moment, to enliven him with hilarious conversation, and he was thinking for whom he should send, when the door opened and a domestic came to announce that Captain Tash solicited an audience.

"Ah! Tash is come back, then!" muttered the prince to himself. "I am glad of it; he is the very fellow to cheer me

up in my present low spirits," and he accordingly bade the footman introduce the captain immediately.

This command was promptly obeyed, and the gallant officer, who was apparelled in the same remarkable fashion as when we beheld him visiting in his cabriolet at Leveson House, made his appearance. The domestic withdrew, and the prince, giving the captain a cordial welcome, bade him sit down and help himself to wine.

"I hope that I see your Royal Highness in a blooming condition," said the captain, as he deliberately filled a tumbler with port wine to the brim. Then, having drained the glass as quietly and calmly as if its contents had been water, he observed, "Pardon me, prince, if I am too familiar, but you look a trifle out of sorts."

"And I feel so, too, Tash," responded his Royal Highness. "But before we talk upon any other subject, give me an account of your proceedings."

"I have fulfilled your Royal Highness's instructions to the very letter," said the captain, "and I will now give you the details with the most perfect accuracy. On receiving your Royal Highness's orders, last week, I proceeded at once to the surgeon's house in Bridge Street, and requested an immediate interview with the young man bearing the singular name of Jack the Foundling. At first the surgeon told me that no such person was there, but when I whispered in his ear to the effect that I came from your Royal Highness, his manner changed in a moment, he looked significant enough, and conducted me up-stairs to a nice, comfortable, room, where I was introduced to the young man. The surgeon left us together, and I began speaking to him in the kindest and friendliest way. Indeed, that is my nature, as I am an uncommon good-tempered fellow. I soon saw that the lad took a fancy to me, and we speedily got upon very good terms with each other. I asked him if he had altogether recovered from the effects of his wound, and he said that he had pretty well, though he did not feel so strong as before he had received it, notwithstanding so many months had elapsed. I then represented to him that there was some kind friend in the background who had interested himself on his behalf, and had been paying the surgeon all this time to take care of him and treat him with every possible attention. The lad said that he knew very well the surgeon had

not been keeping him there for the last seven or eight months out of mere philanthropy, particularly as a certain sort of mystery had been observed in making him stay indoors as much as possible, and only taking him out for an airing occasionally of an evening in a carriage. I answered that all this had been done with the view of preventing him from falling again into the hands of the infamous people with whom he had been brought up and who might have been on the lookout for him. Thereupon Jack the Foundling observed that during the time he lay stretched upon a sick-bed, in consequence of his wound, he had reflected upon his past career, and had hoped that something would be done to prevent him from relapsing into his old habits."

"Then he did really seem as if he wished to turn over a new leaf?" asked the prince.

"No doubt of it, your Royal Highness," responded Tash, taking the opportunity of the interruption to refill and empty his tumbler. "The lad told me that some time ago Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the Bow Street officer, had tried to reclaim him, but that some evil spirit getting possession of his soul, prompted him to return to his old friends. He assured me, however, that his long illness had given his mind a better turn, and he really felt anxious to do something honest for his livelihood. I then told him that his former protector, Daniel Coffin, had that very morning been arrested for murder, and would be hanged as sure as he himself had tucked up scores in his time. The young fellow had not previously heard of the occurrence, and he certainly did not seem much affected by it, but observed that he always thought Coffin would come to some bad end. He nevertheless did manifest some uneasiness about a young woman and her brother, named Melmoth, and who, he said, lived with Daniel Coffin. He told me that he and these Melmoths had been brought up together, and that he had a sort of affection for them. I assured him that from what I had learned they did not appear to be at all involved in Coffin's troubles, and I even went so far as to declare that I would see something was done for them in case Coffin should go out of the world leaving them destitute. This assurance evidently gave young Jack very great satisfaction, and looking hard at me, he said, 'I suppose, sir, you are the

kind friend who has been in the background all the while and who has interested himself in me?' 'Well, well, my boy, perhaps I am,' said I, 'perhaps I am, but I don't say so, mind, and you must not ask me any more questions.' That was the way I managed him, your Royal Highness," added Tash, "for a man who can parry a thrust with a rapier is not likely to be at a loss to do the same with a searching question."

"You acted most prudently, my dear fellow," said the prince, laughing. "Come, fill your tumbler again, and then proceed."

"This wine is excellent," observed Tash, when he had poured another quantum down his throat. He then went on to say, "You see, sir, I played my part so well that the lad soon had confidence in me, and maybe he thought that I was either his father, or some very near relation, having particular reasons not to acknowledge him openly. However, be that as it may, he certainly received the impression that I was the kind friend who had been in the background during his residence at the surgeon's, and that I had at length come forward to take some decisive step respecting his future prospects."

"And of course you suffered that impression to remain upon his mind?" said his Royal Highness, interrogatively.

"To be sure I did," responded Tash. "Was it not in obedience to the hints you had previously given me for my guidance in the matter? However, to make a long story as short as possible," continued the captain, "I went on to explain the plan which was proposed for the future benefit of the youth. I told him that if he liked to go out to Jamaica, a comfortable situation in a mercantile house, with a good salary, was at his service in that island, that there was a ship then in the Downs to sail with the next fair wind, and that if he would go down with me to Deal and embark in that vessel, I would place a hundred guineas in his hands ere taking leave of him on board. I showed him the letter from the London branch of the Jamaica house, guaranteeing the situation, and I also showed him the money. He did not take many minutes to consider, but gave his consent with joy and gratitude. The business being thus settled, I sent and ordered a post-chaise, and away we sped into Kent. We reached Deal that evening, and went at once to

a slopdealer's or outfitter's, where I bought him a sea-chest and everything suited for the voyage. Next morning we went on board the ship, but as the wind did not change favourably till yesterday, the vessel had to remain at anchor in the Downs for some days. I stayed with him on board, for having once succeeded in getting him there, I did not choose to trust him out of my sight, or give him the chance of slipping away in some boat, in case he altered his mind. But he did not appear to repent of his decision; on the contrary, his spirits rose in proportion as he became accustomed to shipboard. As for me, I managed to pass the time pretty pleasantly, for the captain of the vessel was a jovial good chap, and there were six or eight merry blades of passengers on board. So I amused myself by making them all drunk every night, and when I parted from them yesterday afternoon, they swore I was the best fellow in existence. As for Master Jack, I gave him his hundred guineas at parting, and he wept with gratitude. I saw the ship sail, and this morning I took a post-chaise and returned straight to London, to report all these particulars to your Royal Highness. So here I am, and that's my history."

"You have acquitted yourself most admirably, my dear captain," said the prince. "I knew full well that you would not fail to execute my commission with delicacy, prudence, and caution, keeping me altogether out of sight and out of the question while conversing with the lad. But tell me, he had not the slightest suspicion that I had ever interested myself concerning him?"

"Not the slightest," responded Tash. "The surgeon had evidently been most discreet and reserved during the many months the young fellow was under his roof. Besides, have I not already told you, sir, that, so far from even dreaming of your intervention in his behalf, Master Jack was perfectly convinced that he saw his previously unknown friend in me?"

"True, to be sure!" ejaculated the prince. "But now let us talk of other things. While you were gone I lost my young friend, your boon companion."

"What, Sackville?" exclaimed the captain. "Ah! I knew full well, before I went, that he would leave your Royal Highness. Those letters he received from his wife made him quite spoony, and when Sir Valentine Malvern

paid his debts, it regularly clinched the nail of his sentimentalism. And so he is gone? Well, he behaved very handsomely to me. When I went and told him, last Sunday, that I should most likely have to leave town for a few days, he took me by the hand, saying, 'Tash, my dear fellow, you have been my companion for some months past, in many a frolic, and though I am going to turn over a new leaf, I do not mean at the same time to show you the cold shoulder. All my debts are paid, and all the bills on which your name appeared together with mine are got in and burned. So you have nothing to fear on that score; and there are five hundred guineas for you, as a token of friendship.' In this manner was it that we parted, and therefore I have nothing to say against Sackville. Depend upon it, sir, he will settle down into a quiet, steady, domesticated husband, always keeping regular hours, taking his supper every night at nine with his wife, and going to bed at half-past ten or eleven, at the latest, except when they receive company."

"Ah! I wish, my dear Tash," said the prince, with a sigh, "that you could bring Venetia back to me; but I am very much afraid that all your ingenuity will not suffice for such an achievement."

"I really don't think it would, sir," rejoined the captain, as he refilled his tumbler, "for everybody who knows Venetia at all must be aware that she is a woman of strong mind and has got a will of her own. Take my advice, prince, and look about you for some other mistress."

"Well, I suppose I must resign myself to that alternative," answered his Royal Highness. "But now, Tash, tell me what I can do for you? In this matter of the lad whom we have just shipped off to the Colonies, you have done me a particular favour. I have not told you why I am at all interested in him, I do not mean to tell you, and I know that you are too discreet to ask me any questions."

"I would sooner shave my moustache and cut off my whiskers," exclaimed Tash, "than display an impertinent curiosity. Whenever your Royal Highness commands, there is at least one who will yield blind and implicit obedience, and that one is honest Rolando Tash. But I think," he continued, again filling his tumbler, "that your Royal Highness was at the moment graciously condescending

to ask what you could do for me as a token of approval in respect to my conduct? "

"Well, name your wishes," said the prince. "But pray be reasonable," he added, laughing, "for if it's money you want, I have devilish little of that commodity to spare. If you would like some little situation —"

"The very thing!" exclaimed the captain. "The truth is, prince, I want to settle down in a comfortable and respectable way, and my man Robin also wishes it, and Robin's opinion has great weight with me. I am well-nigh tired of frequenting taverns and gaming-houses, and getting into scrapes with constables and watchmen for night-rows and so on, while Robin is equally tired of standing behind lamp-posts or sneaking up into corners and doorways. Besides," added the captain, lowering his voice to a mysterious kind of whisper, "I have been seriously thinking of matrimony."

"Matrimony! What, you?" ejaculated the prince, and he burst out laughing.

"Well, I am glad your Royal Highness can laugh so heartily at last," observed Tash, "for you looked as glum and mopish as a mute at a dead man's door when I came in. But, 'pon my soul, I am in earnest. Indeed, I never was more in earnest in my life," and as if to ratify his words, the captain refilled his tumbler and tossed off the contents at a draught.

"But are you in love?" inquired the prince.

"Not I. I never was in love in my life, that is to say, in real sentimental, poetizing, moonlight, spoony kind of love. I never wrote sonnets to a lady's beauty, but conveyed my admiration by the far more practical method of giving her a hearty kiss at once."

"Then I presume," continued the prince, still laughing, "that if you are not in love, but mean to marry, you are on the lookout for a lady with a fortune?"

"That is just about the mark," responded Captain Tash. "A lady with some four or five hundred a year would suit my purpose uncommonly."

"But that is no great fortune, after all," observed the prince. "Must she be beautiful, into the bargain?"

"Well, I cannot say that I am prepared to throw myself away upon an old harridan as shrivelled as a mummy, and at the same time I do not want a silly young creature of

sixteen or seventeen, who looks as if she had just left off pinafores and escaped from the nursery. You see, my dear prince, that a fine-looking man like me — and this I may say without vanity — must have a wife to correspond. In short, Mrs. Tash should be a commanding woman, thirty years of age, or thereabouts, and if I can meet with such a one, I think that I could guarantee becoming a very excellent husband."

"Do you mean me to help you to this acquisition?" asked the prince, "because I can assure you that it is not at all in my way. Unless, indeed," he added, laughing, "it were some cast-off mistress that I wanted to get rid of and provide for."

"Upon my soul, a man may do worse things," answered Captain Tash, "than take a prince's cast-off mistress. However, as you, sir, have nothing of that sort handy at the moment, we needn't say another word. But to return to what we were talking of, namely, the testimonial of your Royal Highness's approval of my conduct —"

"Ah! that's it," said the prince. "Well, leave it to me, Tash. You are a good fellow, and I shall provide for you. Come to me again in a few days and we will talk the matter over."

The gallant officer made due acknowledgments for this kind promise, and then took his departure. As soon as he was gone, the prince seated himself at a side table where there were writing materials, and penned a letter to his sister the Princess Sophia, informing her that her son was at length fully provided for, having sailed for the Colonies. Scarcely had he sealed and despatched this letter to St. James's Palace, where her Royal Highness dwelt, when a domestic entered to state that Mrs. Arbuthnot solicited an immediate audience of the prince regent.

"Ah! I can guess what this is about," he said to himself, with a start of impatience; but deeming it more prudent to see her, he desired that she might be admitted.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE INTRIGUING MOTHER

When Mrs. Arbuthnot entered the room, she found the prince seated upon the sofa near the table on which the refreshments were spread, and she instantaneously saw that his look and manner were full of a cold hauteur, a sort of a tacit warning to make her aware that he was in no humour to put up with any "scene." Her demeanour was profoundly respectful, with a tinge of reproachful mournfulness, for she was a thorough adept in all hypocrisies and artifices, and knew full well how to assume an aspect suitable to any occasion or to any circumstances.

The prince partially rose from his seat, bowed distantly, and waved his hand toward a chair; then, without uttering a word, he awaited the explanation of this visit.

"Your Royal Highness will graciously pardon me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, commencing in the gentlest and mildest tone, for she was desirous to see what humble persuasion would do first, ere she had recourse to the alternative of harsher means, "your Royal Highness will pardon me for this intrusion, but it is on a very painful matter that I have ventured to approach the representative of my sovereign."

"Proceed, madam," said the prince, with a slight bow, and with a glacial courtesy of manner.

"My daughter Penelope," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "is in a way to become a mother, and she is profoundly anxious relative to the future."

"I told your daughter, madam," responded the prince, "that when the time came that she could no longer conceal her situation, — and that, from what she told me, will be some months hence, — she could easily retire from the court for a short period, under suitable arrangements, which your

experience, no doubt," he added, somewhat ironically, " will enable you to carry into effect."

" Sir, wherefore this species of taunt thrown out against me? " asked Mrs. Arbuthnot. " Would you insinuate that I am accustomed to suggest or invent plans to conceal the disgrace of young ladies? If so, your Royal Highness is exceedingly mistaken."

" Madam, I cannot forget the facility with which you lent yourself to the little freak which made me covet your daughter, and therefore I naturally suppose that such pandering pastimes cannot be altogether strange to you."

" Does your Royal Highness mean that my daughter was not pure and chaste when she received you to her arms? " exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, scarcely able to repress her indignation, " or would you imply that through my agency she had been frail before? "

" No, I mean nothing of the sort," answered the prince. " I do not wish to throw the slightest aspersion on Miss Penelope's honour previous to her intimacy with me. On the contrary, I will even declare my conviction that she was pure and chaste, as you express it; but it is not the less a fact that you yourself intrigued cunningly enough to hand her over to me. Am I not therefore justified in supposing that, as you got her into the scrape, so you will get her out of it? And as I hinted to her last night, if she wants a few hundred pounds, as a matter of course they are entirely at her service. What more can I do? What more do you require? "

" I had flattered myself, sir," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, again relapsing into that coaxing, fawning, toad-eating manner which was habitual to her, and had been acquired by a long career of grovelling servility toward all with whom she had lived, " I had flattered myself that my poor girl would not have been thus discarded by your Royal Highness with scarcely even a kind word — "

" Then I suppose that she has explained to you," interrupted the prince, " everything which took place between us last evening at Windsor Castle? Now, let me be explicit on my side. From what your daughter said to me, it was quite evident she had entertained the loftiest pretensions. I do not exactly know of what nature these may have been, or to what height her ambition soared, but certain it is that

she expected some signal reward for having honoured me with her favours. Now, let me tell you, my dear madam," continued his Royal Highness, ironically, "that young ladies generally conceive they are honoured by the circumstance of winning my favour, and if I were to shower rewards upon all the sweet creatures who received me to their arms I should have quite enough to do. Perhaps your daughter fancied that I ought to make her a peeress in her own right, of give her a pension of a thousand a year. God bless you, ma'am, if all my mistresses were similarly ambitious and mercenary, the world would be perfectly astonished at the number of peeresses I should have to create, and the House of Commons, obedient and ductile as it is, would stand aghast at the frightful increase of the pension list."

Mrs. Arbuthnot remained silent for upwards of a minute, not knowing exactly whether to continue arguing the point peaceably, or whether at once to have recourse to harsher and sterner means. The prince, fancying that he had advanced an argument which had put her to confusion, and indeed confounded her altogether, rose from his seat, bowed stiffly, and was advancing to pull the bell as an intimation that the interview was over, when Mrs. Arbuthnot said, in a somewhat determined voice, "Then your Royal Highness is resolved to do nothing for my daughter?"

"What can I do?" he ejaculated, impatiently. "The bare idea that she abandoned herself to me from the mercenary motives which have since transpired is but too well calculated to fill me with disgust, and as I never entertained a very high opinion of the mother, I am sorry to say that I am now led to think with equal indifference of the daughter," and again he advanced toward the bell.

"Stay, sir, one moment," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, suddenly throwing off all the fawning servility of the hypocritical toad-eater, and putting on a dogged air of resoluteness, "our interview is not quite ended yet."

"Madam," said the prince, turning upon her a look of the loftiest disdain, "if you were a man, I should ring to order my lackeys to expel you unceremoniously, but as you are a woman, I cannot treat you with that ignominy. At the same time, permit me to request that you immediately leave the room."

"And were I a man," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I should

be induced to flog you with a horsewhip for the baseness and heartlessness of your conduct. As it is, I warn you that I have the power of wreaking a terrible revenge."

"Now, will you explain yourself?" said the prince, becoming frightened, and scarcely able to conceal that he was so, for he instantaneously saw that Mrs. Arbuthnot would never dare adopt such a demeanour as this and use such words as those unless fully confident of wielding some terrible weapon of vengeance.

"If your Royal Highness will resume your seat," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, speaking with more calmness, "I will very speedily explain my meaning."

The prince returned to the sofa, and sat down without saying a word.

"Believe me," continued the bedchamber woman, "it is painful, most painful, to be compelled to adopt such a tone as I am now using, but neither I nor my daughter are worms to be trodden upon with impunity. I am in possession of a secret regarding a member of the royal family, a secret of such fearful import that if made known it would strike the whole country, ay, and all the world, with terror and consternation — Shall I go on?"

"Yes, explain yourself," answered the prince, not knowing to what possible circumstance Mrs. Arbuthnot could allude; and, unfortunately for him, there were so many important secrets connected with himself and his family that he was at a loss to fix upon the one that was known to his visitress.

"Then I must proceed," she continued, "and it is with pain that I do so. Sir, the secret to which I allude intimately concerns the honour, the character, and if he were of humbler station, the very life of your royal brother the Duke of Cumberland. There is a document in existence —"

"A document! But of what kind? What does it refer to?" demanded the prince, nervously agitated.

"Sir, it is a letter which the murdered Sellis —"

"Murdered!" echoed the prince, instantaneously catching the significancy of Mrs. Arbuthnot's expression. "No, he committed suicide. The coroner's inquest proved it —"

"That your Royal Highness firmly believes the story of the unfortunate man's suicide, I have no doubt," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "but there are proofs to the contrary."

"And those proofs?" ejaculated the prince.

"Listen, and I will tell you everything."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then proceeded to sketch in rapid outline all that she had heard some short time back from Mrs. Bredalbane, and his Royal Highness, to do him justice, was horrified at the complexion which the frightful story now wore, and which involved such tremendous charges, not only against his brother, the Duke of Cumberland, but likewise his sister, the Princess Augusta. He rose from the sofa and began pacing the room in an agitated manner, giving frequent vent to ejaculations which showed how profoundly he felt the terrible things that had been revealed to him. That he himself might have had some distant suspicion of the possibility of his brother's guilt, relative to the death of Sellis, was probable, was even likely, but if so, he must ever have striven to put it away from his thoughts, as a man endeavours to shake off the influence of a hideous dream. But most assuredly the prince had never suspected that his sister Augusta had been so deeply criminal as he was now forced to believe her. Profligate, unprincipled, heartless, and depraved as he was, saturated with vices, capable of any iniquity in the pursuit of pleasure and in the conquest of female virtue, yet the prince regent was not so far removed from humanity and so nearly allied to the nature of a fiend as to remain indifferent to the details of Mrs. Arbuthnot's disclosures.

On her part, the wily woman saw how deeply the arrow had penetrated, and how excruciatingly its barbed head rankled in the heart which it had pierced, and she chuckled inwardly as she felt that some result beneficial to herself and daughter would ensue from the course she had taken.

"Can you procure that fragment of a letter written by Sellis?" suddenly asked the prince, as he stopped short in front of where the bedchamber woman had remained seated.

"Yes, I can," was her response.

"And you will do so?"

"I will."

"Of course you expect your reward?" continued the prince. "What is it to be?"

"I am moderate in my ambition," she answered. "All I need is that my own position at the court shall not be

endangered by the exposure of my daughter's shame, and therefore that she herself may be provided for."

"But how?" cried the prince. "I can give her money, but nothing more. I cannot give her a title, and that is what she was looking after. I saw, by everything she said last night, that such was her desire. If she were married, it were different. I could do something for her husband."

"Ah! if she were married it would indeed be easy — I understand," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "You can confer a title, a baronetcy, we will say, upon her husband, and it will be precisely the same thing, since the lustre of the rank would be reflected upon her. But how can she marry, situated as she is?"

"Hold!" ejaculated the prince, a sudden idea striking him. Then, after a few instants' deliberation, he said, "Mrs. Arbuthnot, if I were to find your daughter a husband who would accept her as she is, knowing that she has been my mistress, knowing also that seven months hence she will become a mother, if I find your daughter such a husband, I ask, will she accept him?"

"Assuredly she will, provided that this husband is at least a baronet, with an income sufficient to maintain my daughter in comfort, if not in splendour. But," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "he must not be a man of repulsive appearance, for I know that Penelope would not sacrifice herself to a person who might be loathsome to her."

"On the contrary," said the prince, his countenance brightening up somewhat as the project which he now revolved in his mind assumed greater consistency and feasibility, "on the contrary, the gentleman of whom I am now thinking is good-looking enough, and there are plenty of young ladies who would be well pleased with his appearance. As for the baronetcy, I promise you he shall have that, and I will likewise guarantee that his income shall not be less than six or seven hundred a year. Indeed, I will find for him some situation, the rangership of a park, the post of an ordnance storekeeper, or perhaps a consulship, — at all events, something both honourable and lucrative."

"I am perfectly contented with the proposed arrangement," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "and on Penelope's part I unhesitatingly accept it."

"When will you come with the document in your posses-

sion?" asked the prince. "Let there be no delay. To-morrow, if you will."

"And shall I bring Penelope with me, so that she may be introduced to her intended husband?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, her question plainly proving that she did not mean to give up Sellis's letter unless convinced that the prince regent, on his part, was prepared to carry out the propositions he had made.

"Yes, bring Penelope with you," was his Royal Highness's answer, "and she shall meet her intended here. Let the hour be three o'clock to-morrow."

"At three o'clock to-morrow I shall be punctual with my daughter."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then took her departure from Carlton House, rejoicing at the success of her visit, and determined in her own mind to purloin the letter of the murdered Sellis from her friend Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk. Accordingly, with this very honest intention, and likewise with an almost fevered anxiety to impart the good news which she had for her daughter's ears, Mrs. Arbuthnot hastened back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE INTENDED HUSBAND

On the following day, punctually at three o'clock, Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot made their appearance at Carlton House, and were at once ushered into an apartment where they found his Royal Highness waiting to receive them. At once rising from his seat with the most familiar courtesy, and even condescending friendliness of manner, the prince regent shook Mrs. Arbuthnot very warmly by the hand, and then throwing his arms around the voluptuously formed Penelope, bestowed upon her a hearty kiss.

Both mother and daughter were somewhat surprised at this remarkable change in the prince's manner, for the elder lady had not failed to acquaint Penelope with the freezing reserve which his Royal Highness had at first manifested toward her on the previous day, and how she had been compelled to use threats to bring him to reason. Of course Mrs. Arbuthnot was well pleased to observe this change, and Penelope submitted with a very good grace to the royal caress, although she now in her heart entertained the most cordial hate toward her seducer.

The prince made the two ladies sit down upon the sofa, and placing himself between them, he said, with an assumption of the most good-humoured jocularity, "Well, after all, this is really a very pretty drama in which we are engaged. But little did I think until yesterday that I should ever be called upon to play the part of a matrimonial agent. I declare that my observation makes you blush, Penelope. Yet I think that you will be well pleased when you see what a fine husband I have selected for you."

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Miss Arbuthnot, "that it is with no small degree of repugnance

I suffer myself to become an object of such indelicate arrangements. Your conduct has, however, left me no choice."

"I am afraid that I treated you somewhat harshly and cruelly the evening before last, when I saw you at Windsor Castle," said the prince, "but I had many things to vex me at the time."

"And chiefly of all, the loss of Lady Sackville," observed Penelope, with some little degree of bitterness.

"I will not deny that her loss has vexed me cruelly," answered the prince. "But I see that you are jealous," he added, laughing. "Now this is certainly not a sentiment to be entertained by a young lady who is on the point of marriage with a very fine, handsome, and agreeable man."

"Then your Royal Highness has really exercised a sound discretion in the choice of a husband for my daughter?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I mean, sir, that you have borne in mind the observations I made upon the point, and that you will not offer for Penelope's acceptance an individual whom she may be ashamed to acknowledge as her husband?"

"I hesitate not to say she will be proud of him," answered the prince. "I assure you he is good-looking, with a fine military air — But tell me, Penelope, do you like moustaches?"

"Sir," replied the young lady, colouring up to the very hair of her head, "there sounds something too much like a tone of banter in your speech to inspire me with much confidence as to the present proceeding. I am already sufficiently humiliated —"

"Pray do not be angry, my dear Penelope," interrupted the prince, passing his arm around her waist. "I only sought to make my peace with you by putting on my best possible humour, but if you feel offended, I can of course become as coldly dignified and freezingly haughty as ever I was in my life. I thought it better not to give too business-like and matter-of-fact an air to the present transaction."

"If that be indeed your motive, sir," responded Miss Arbuthnot, "I thank you for your kind consideration, and beg that you will retain your present humour." But while she thus spoke, she gently disengaged herself from the royal arm and moved a little nearer toward the extremity of the sofa.

" My dear madam," asked the prince, now turning toward Mrs. Arbuthnot, " have you procured the letter of which you spoke to me yesterday? "

" I have, sir," was the answer, and as she spoke, the lady produced the paper which she had succeeded in abstracting from Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk.

" You will permit me to look at it," said the prince. " Not that I mean to keep it," he added, laughing, " until Miss Penelope is introduced to her intended husband, and therefore the moment I have cast my eyes over it, I will return it to you."

" Rather, permit me to read the contents to your Royal Highness," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a significant look. " You will find that it is worded precisely as I told you yesterday, and that it is clearly corroborative of the tale told by the valet Joux and which I also described to you."

" Read the letter, then," said the prince, in a short, abrupt manner. " You must really think me very dishonourable to suppose for an instant that I would keep the paper if entrusted in my hands, and evade the fulfilment of the bargain entered into between us yesterday."

" Your Royal Highness should neither be surprised nor offended that I adopt the proper precaution," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, in a firm tone. " But listen, and I will read this letter."

With the contents of this fragmentary document the reader is already acquainted; we need not therefore reproduce it here. Suffice it to say that a gloom began to settle upon the prince's countenance as soon as Mrs. Arbuthnot commenced reading it aloud, and at the mention of that pointed allusion to the Princess Augusta's unnatural criminality, his Royal Highness gave a visible shudder. He said not a word, however, until she had finished, and even then he remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in a moody reverie.

" You two ladies," he at length said, " are acquainted with a secret which vitally concerns the honour of my brother and my sister. Rest assured that I am prepared to fulfil the conditions yesterday agreed upon. I have spoken to a gentleman, an intimate friend of my own, who is willing, Penelope, to become your husband. As I said ere now, in a good-humoured strain, and as I seriously repeat at present,

he is not one of whose personal appearance you need be ashamed. As for his social position, he already possesses a certain military rank, and here," continued the prince, producing a sealed document from his pocket, " is a patent drawn out, conferring upon him the title of a baronet. An appointment, to which is annexed an income of eight hundred a year, is likewise at his service. Thus you perceive I am ready to accomplish my part of the bargain without delay. I may add that the gentleman to whom I allude is at this moment within the walls of the palace, waiting to be introduced to you. In short, he is in an adjoining room. But now, what guarantee have I that when all these conditions are fulfilled fresh demands will not be made upon me, fresh documents of horror produced, and the threatened exposure of fresh secrets held in terror over me? "

" Prince," answered Penelope, speaking in a firm tone, and looking him full in the face with a calm dignity of demeanour, " I know not what guarantee can possibly be given you in respect to the eventualities to which you allude. But this I solemnly affirm on my own account: all I seek, all I have ever sought, is a position which shall save me from disgrace and poverty. This position your Royal Highness is now about to give me, and I can assure you that mine is not an ungrateful heart. If in every respect your royal word is fulfilled, I would sooner study to do you a service than work you an injury. As for my mother, I believe that her sentiments are precisely the same."

" Penelope has spoken so well, so truly, and so candidly upon the subject," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, " that I have really nothing to add, unless it be to remind your Royal Highness that should either of us hereafter prove ungrateful, the means of revenge are in your own hands. A word from your Royal Highness to the queen would deprive me of my situation at court, and a stroke of the pen would cancel the government situation to be conferred upon Penelope's husband. Surely, then, these are guarantees sufficient? "

" Yes, or at least I must consider them so," rejoined the prince. " But as you have proved so exceedingly suspicious of my good faith, and have even exhibited a disinclination to trust that letter in my hands, you cannot be surprised if I should be equally wary and cautious. There is now one more question I have to ask."

" Speak, prince," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, " and you will see that I am prepared to deal as candidly as possible with your Royal Highness."

" You have not yet told me," answered the prince, " from whom you received all these particulars relative to that frightful affair, and from whom you procured that document? "

" From Mrs. Bredalbane, one of her Majesty's bedchamber women," was Mrs. Arbuthnot's reply.

" Ah! I know her well, a regular old female courtier," said the prince, his countenance brightening up. " There is no harm to be anticipated at her hands. Besides," he muttered to himself, " when once that document " — alluding to Sellis's fragmentary letter — " is burned, the main evidence is gone and the tale shrinks into a mere piece of gossiping tittle-tattle. Well, then," he said, again speaking aloud, " I think that we have nothing more to say. But mind, it is understood that when I introduce her intended husband to Miss Penelope, and place in his hands the document conferring the baronetcy, that letter " — and he pointed to the one which Mrs. Arbuthnot held tight between her fingers — " shall be at once given over into my possession? "

" Such is the arrangement for which I myself should have stipulated," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

" But there is one thing of which no mention has been made," observed Penelope, and the flush of shame appeared upon her countenance as she spoke.

" Ah! I know what my daughter means," exclaimed her mother. " Has your Royal Highness frankly and candidly stated to the gentleman, whom as yet you have not named to us, Penelope's exact position? "

" He knows everything," answered the prince, " and such is his devotion to me that he will cheerfully bestow his name upon Miss Penelope. I think that every preliminary is now settled, and that nothing remains to be done save and except to introduce the individual in question."

Thus speaking, the prince rose from his seat and advanced toward a door at the extremity of the apartment. Penelope and her mother also rose, the former becoming greatly agitated, and the latter whispering hurried words of encouragement in her ears. Penelope accordingly sum-

moned all her courage to her aid, and intensely eager was the look of curiosity and suspense which she now fixed upon the door toward which the prince was advancing. He opened it, beckoned the young lady's future husband forth, and then turning quickly around as that gentleman made his appearance, exclaimed, " Ladies, permit me to introduce Sir Rolando Tash."

And our friend the captain indeed it was. Never in his own idea had he looked so blooming or so killing. His frock coat, one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast, was pinched in at the waist to such a degree that its wearer was compelled to draw his respirations in the softest manner possible, for fear the hooks and eyes should give way. His gray military trousers had stripes of the broadest gold lace down the legs, and his boots were so brilliantly polished as to be perfect mirrors for every article of furniture in the room. Indeed, as the gallant officer bowed to the ladies as low as his tightly fitting garments would permit, he caught a glimpse of his hirsute countenance on the surface of either boot. But his hair, his mustachios, his imperial, and his whiskers — heavens! who can describe their magnificence? He would have made the fortune of any perruquier in the Burlington Arcade by merely standing in the shop-window for a single half-hour each day. To do the captain full justice, however, all his hair was his own, and no pains had been spared to give it the richest gloss which bear's grease could impart, and the finest twist that curling-irons could produce. He wore a pair of dove-coloured gloves, and instead of one gold chain festooning over the outside of his coat, he wore two. The end of an embroidered cambric handkerchief peeped out of his pocket behind, and, to close our description, we must not forget to observe that he was as highly perfumed as if he had just been imported from those lands which are said to abound in myrrh, aloes, and cassia.

He was known by sight to both the ladies, and he knew them also, for when watching at the Green Dragon, as described in the earliest chapters of our history, he had seen the ladies at Acacia Cottage, and the ladies had seen him coming in and out of the Green Dragon aforesaid. So that when the prince had mentioned to him who the frail maid of honour was for whom a husband was required, Sir Ro-

lando Tash, as we must now call him, had at once jumped at the proposal, inasmuch as he had very highly appreciated the personal qualifications of Miss Penelope. Advancing, therefore, with the most studied demeanour of affability and jauntiness, Sir Rolando Tash smiled so as to exhibit his white teeth in contrast with the glossy darkness of his moustache, and when he reached the place where the ladies were standing, he literally confounded himself in bows and salutations.

Penelope was willing enough to receive this gentleman as a husband, but perhaps she would have laughed at the manner in which he now accosted her had not a sense of shame produced a more serious feeling.

" Come, Miss Arbuthnot," said the prince, " you need not be bashful. My very particular friend, Sir Rolando Tash, feels highly honoured at the prospect of conducting you to the altar; and if you are equally satisfied to accompany him thither, I do not see why your happiness should be delayed beyond to-morrow. A special license, St. George's, Hanover Square, a *déjeuner*, off in a chaise-and-four to spend the honeymoon at Brighton or Bath, and a paragraph in the newspapers to let the world know what has happened, — these are all that are now required."

" Fair lady," began Sir Rolando Tash, with another low bow, " may I venture to hope that my suit is acceptable, and that you are prepared to follow the kind suggestions of our mutual friend his Royal Highness the Prince Regent? "

Penelope gave her hand to the newly created baronet in token of an affirmative response, and her suitor gallantly raised that fair hand to his lips.

" Receive, my dear Sir Rolando, the patent which bestows the title I had already authorized you to bear," and as the prince thus spoke he presented the document to Penelope's intended husband.

At the same moment Mrs. Arbuthnot gave the prince Sellis's unfinished letter, which his Royal Highness at once consigned to his pocket.

We need not dwell any longer upon this episode in our history. Suffice it to say that Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope, on taking leave of the prince, were escorted by Sir Rolando Tash to the house of their friend, Miss Bathurst, in Stratton Street; and this lady, upon hearing what was in contempla-

tion, cheerfully received the mother and daughter, and at once volunteered to provide the wedding breakfast for the following morning. Sir Rolando Tash remained to dinner, and as he strove to render himself as amiable as possible, he succeeded uncommonly well, the only peculiarity in his manners which struck the ladies' attention being the little circumstance that he drank his wine out of a tumbler, and of that wine imbibed no small quantity. However, when he rose to take his leave, shortly after ten o'clock, he was evidently as sober as when he had sat down, thus proving that if he were fond of the bottle, the bottle had no particular enmity to him.

On the following morning Penelope became Lady Tash, and while the happy pair were being whirled away in a post-chaise to Bath, Mrs. Arbuthnot sped back to Windsor to resume her duties at the castle and to communicate her daughter's marriage to the queen. But ere closing this chapter, we must not forget to observe that the faithful Robin, in his brilliant suit of livery, was seated in the rumble of the post-chaise that conveyed his master and mistress to the fashionable watering-place where the honeymoon was to be passed.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BROTHER AND SISTER

In a neat little parlour, on the ground floor of a pretty cottage in Islington, Ariadne Varian and her brother Theodore were seated. It was in the middle of the day, and the sun was showing off all the gaudy colouring of the flowers in the garden behind the cottage. A Venetian blind, three parts drawn down, mellowed the golden effulgence ere it penetrated into the parlour, and thus there was a subdued light within that room.

Ariadne, who was seated at work with her needle, was dressed in white, and the virgin drapery set off the sylphid symmetry of her tall slender figure with the most bewitching effect. Her flaxen tresses, so soft and fine, fell in luxuriant profusion upon her beautiful sloping shoulders, and as from time to time she lifted her sweet azure eyes, when addressing her brother, who was sitting in a somewhat mournful mood, the lovely countenance of the young damsel wore an expression of immaculate innocence.

Theodore did not speak much. When his sister made a few remarks, evidently with the intention of cheering him, he answered her with all his wonted kindness, but still with a brevity which showed that he was in no humour for conversation, or, at all events, that his thoughts were far away from the topic on which she addressed him.

At length she said, after a pause which had lasted longer than previous ones, " My dear Theodore, you seem far from happy? "

" You know, my dearest Ariadne, what it is that troubles me. Deeply as I appreciate the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, immense as the gratitude is which I feel toward him, yet I cannot help abhorring this dependent position."

"I am well aware, Theodore," answered his sister, over whose countenance a slight blush had flitted at the mention of the baronet's name, "that you have done all you could to obtain another situation since the terrible fate of Mr. Emmerson deprived you of that which you held in his office, but as yet you have not succeeded, and I think that instead of repining at the succour which you have received from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, you ought to thank Heaven for having sent you so generous a friend."

"And so I do, Ariadne, and I have just told you so," responded Theodore. "But surely you yourself must feel that it is unseemly, it is even humiliating, to be dependent upon him for the bread which we eat, for the house which we live in, and for the garments which we wear."

"I do feel all that, my dear brother," returned the young damsel, "and I wish to Heaven that you would permit me to do what I have often and often begged you to allow."

"What, do needlework for the shops!" ejaculated Theodore. "No, my dear Ariadne, you shall not waste yourself to a shadow, dim your bright eyes, and sew your very winding-sheet, at that crushing, wretchedly paid occupation. I told Sir Douglas the other day, when he called, that I wished to obtain a situation, and he said he would speak to some mercantile friends upon the subject, but he has not been here since, and I fear that he has forgotten it. Do you know, Ariadne," said Theodore, after another pause, "that I have but a guinea left of the last sum which Sir Douglas's bounty forced upon me, and when that is gone I shall not know whence to obtain more, unless I procure a situation. Not for worlds could I apply to him again. Day after day have I called at warehouses, answered advertisements, and done everything I could to procure a situation, but, alas! alas! when I mentioned my name, and, as in duty bound, explained all that had happened to me and the dreadful ordeal through which I have passed, those to whom I applied instantaneously looked cold and begged to decline. Ariadne," exclaimed Theodore, bitterly, "although I have the document containing my full pardon in my pocket, yet it seems not sufficient to efface the Cain-brand of Newgate from my brow."

"O heavens, my dear brother," cried Ariadne, bursting into tears, "talk not thus!" and, putting aside her work,

she rose from her chair, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him tenderly.

"You are a sweet, dear girl," said Theodore, straining her to his breast, "and it is on account of you that I am unhappy. I feel that my position is worse than precarious, it is almost hopeless; and then, in the moments of my deepest despondency, I ask myself again and again what is to become of you. Methinks I shall take another name, conceal the fact that I have been unfortunate, and thus endeavour to get a situation."

"No, no, dearest brother," said Ariadne, who was now standing by his side with her hand upon his shoulder, and she seemed like an angel watching over a denizen of earth, "you must practise no deception. Let us put our faith in Heaven. God will not desert us."

"Ah! but am I deserving of God's favour?" suddenly exclaimed Theodore, conscience-stricken by the sense of the unmitigated virulence and savage perseverance with which he had hunted a fellow creature to the scaffold.

"Why do you speak thus?" asked his sister, now gazing down upon him as he remained seated in his chair while she continued standing by his side. "Why do you speak thus, I ask?" For the beautiful girl was totally ignorant of the course which her brother had adopted toward Emmerson.

"My dear sister," he immediately said, giving an evasive reply, "was I not criminal in wronging my employer even to the trifling amount in which I was a defaulter and notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances of the case?"

"Theodore," she answered, the tears again streaming from her eyes, "it was on my account you did that. Oh, I was the authoress of all your sufferings."

"Angel of purity that you are, accuse not yourself," ejaculated Theodore, starting from his seat, and again embracing her affectionately. "Come, dry your eyes; I must not see you weep. You know how I love you."

"Yes, and it is because you are such a dear, kind brother to me that God will not desert you," said Ariadne.

"Again I say, dry your eyes, look cheerful, smile upon me, and we will not yield to despondency. Let us go out for a walk together. I will devote the whole of this day to you, and to-morrow I will recommence my search after a situation. It is impossible but that I must sooner or later fall in with

some generous-minded man who will view my past misfortunes without prejudice. And now smile, Ariadne," said Theodore, smiling himself in order to win back the wished-for radiance to his sister's angelic countenance.

At this moment a knock was heard at the front door. It was a double knock, and a well-known one, too, for Theodore immediately exclaimed, " Here is Sir Douglas! "

The colour instantaneously mounted to Ariadne's cheeks, her gentle bosom heaved, and something like a sigh rose to her lips. But her brother observed not all this, for he had turned hastily around to meet the baronet whom the servant-girl had just admitted.

" My dear Theodore, how are you? " said Sir Douglas. " Miss Varian, I hope I find you well. But perhaps I am intruding at this moment? "

" You intrude? Never! " exclaimed Theodore, warmly pressing the hand of his benefactor, while Ariadne's looks unconsciously gave a similar assurance.

" Then, in that case I will sit down," said the baronet, " not only because I am somewhat tired, having walked all the way hither from the West End, but likewise because I wish to speak to you, Theodore, on some little business. But I dare say you are astonished when I tell you that I have walked? The fact is, when I come to see you I do not like such formal ceremony as driving hither in my carriage or cabriolet; indeed, I should be very much pleased to settle down into a quiet, unostentatious mode of life. However, it was not to hold forth upon my own likes or dislikes that I came hither now."

The baronet had seated himself while thus speaking; Ariadne and Theodore had also resumed their chairs, and both waited with some degree of suspense until Sir Douglas should explain the business to which he had alluded, for they alike thought and hoped it referred to his promise to interest himself in obtaining the young man a situation.

" When I was last here," resumed Huntingdon, " I said something about a mercantile firm with which I am acquainted. It is the head of the establishment who is my friend, and I could not see him before this morning, although I assure you I have called every day for that purpose. I dare swear you fancied I had forgotten it altogether."

" I have received too many proofs of your generosity,"

answered Theodore, " to think that you would intentionally neglect your kind promise; but I certainly feared that amid your engagements you had overlooked it."

" And did you think so also, Miss Varian? " asked Sir Douglas, turning his eyes upon the young damsel. But he gazed not on her as he had been wont to gaze on others of her sex; there was always an expression of respectful admiration in his countenance when he looked upon that fair young creature, around whom a halo of innocence seemed to dwell.

" I feared as my brother did," she answered, in a soft tone and with downcast eyes, " for I am well aware that a gentleman in your sphere must have so many things to engage his attention."

" Ay, but perhaps I think more of my friends when absent from them than you give me credit for," he said, good-humouredly. " It is not because I remain away from them that they are absent from my thoughts. However, to come to the point, I have seen Mr. Chapman, the wealthy merchant to whom I have alluded, and I fully and frankly explained to him everything. I must tell you that he has established two or three English agencies on the Continent, and it just happens that at this moment the manager of one of these agencies — I forget where he told me it was — has written to him to say that he requires a confidential young man to be sent to him at once, to supply a vacancy that has occurred in the branch establishment which he superintends. The salary is a hundred and fifty pounds a year, rising according to the merits of the individual, and as it is entirely for the English correspondence, a knowledge of foreign languages is not needed as a qualification. This situation, Theodore, is at your service. Indeed, it is yours already, and you have got nothing to do but to take my card and go at once to Lime Street and make the arrangements with Mr. Chapman."

Theodore's joy knew no bounds, and Ariadne shed tears of gratitude and delight. The brother and sister poured forth their acknowledgments as well as they were able, for their voices were suffocated, and Ariadne's well-nigh lost altogether, in the fulness of the emotions that swelled their hearts.

" My dear friends, I know you feel all you say, and much more," exclaimed the baronet, who was himself affected.

"But haste, Theodore, and be off into the City. Take a cab, never mind this extravagance for once, because I told Mr. Chapman you would call upon him this afternoon. Besides, I want you to come back as soon as you can, as I have made up my mind to pass the rest of the day with you. It is now half-past one o'clock. What time do you dine? Let us say four, and the interval will be ample enough for you, Theodore, to transact your business with my friend Chapman. Ah! now I see that Miss Varian does not like the idea of my inviting myself to dine with you?"

"Oh, Sir Douglas Huntingdon!" she exclaimed, with a sort of enthusiasm excited by her grateful feelings, "if you beheld a sudden change in my look, it is because I felt that we cannot entertain you as we could wish, or else —"

But she stopped short in the sweetest confusion.

"Miss Ariadne," answered the baronet, "I think that when I was here last I told you how simple my habits have become. The more frugal the fare, the better I shall like it, and therefore do not be uneasy on that account. Now, Theodore, lose no time, but be off. I suppose you will permit me to remain here until your return?"

"I am rejoiced that you purpose to do so," responded the young man, and there was a world of meaning in the look which he threw upon the baronet, for it was as much as to say, "I am not afraid to leave you alone with my sister, for I know that however gay your life may have been, you experience too generous a feeling and too great a respect for her to cast upon her even a glance tainted with impurity."

The young man accordingly hurried away, and the baronet was now left alone with Ariadne Varian.

"You can take up your work again if you like," said Huntingdon, "while I sit here and talk to you."

The damsel gladly availed herself of this permission, for it was with some degree of confusion and with a fluttering heart that she thus found herself alone with the baronet. She accordingly took up the work which she had ere now thrown aside, and it was in every respect a relief to be enabled to bend down her eyes upon it.

"Now, Miss Varian," resumed the baronet, after a brief pause, "tell me whether you approve of this arrangement which I have made for your brother? I do not know whether I have informed him accurately as to the amount of in-

come which he is to expect in the situation placed at his disposal. It may be a trifle more, but I am very certain it is not less. Mr. Chapman would have taken him into his establishment in London if I had chosen, but considering all the circumstances of the past, I thought it better that Theodore should go abroad, at all events for a few years. I am well aware how deeply he feels the past, but all the poignant memory thereof will be effaced when he shall have had a full opportunity of what the world calls retrieving his good name. Of course, knowing everything as I do, I may speak thus candidly to you, and now you understand the reasons which have induced me to procure him this situation abroad."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon, I feel and appreciate the delicacy of your conduct even more if possible than its generosity," and the damsel's sweet azure eyes were raised for a moment with a look of heartfelt gratitude, and then they fell again upon her work; but for truth's sake we are bound to say that the stitches she was now making were not very regular, nor such as she herself would have approved of had her thoughts been less confused and more concentrated in her occupation.

"And now you must tell me, Miss Varian," resumed the baronet, "whether you yourself will like to go abroad?"

"Oh, I would go to the ends of the earth in company with that dear brother," she exclaimed, "who has been so kind to me."

"Humph!" said the baronet. "The ends of the earth, eh? Then you are fully prepared to leave England? But you do not answer me. Of course you could not prefer, as a matter of choice, to leave your native land for so long a period. And yet I do not suppose you have any particular tie to bind you to London?"

"I hope," said Ariadne, in a voice which proved how deeply she was struggling to keep down the emotions that were rising up in her throat, "that you will permit me to see your kind housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, before I leave, for I never can forget her goodness to me while I was at your house."

"Most certainly, you shall see Mrs. Baines," answered the baronet. "By the bye, I can tell you an anecdote that will illustrate the goodness of that excellent woman's char-

acter, and prove how totally free from selfishness is her disposition. I must, however, preface it by informing you that a fortnight ago I called upon Lady Sackville, at Carlton House. It was the very day before she left it for good, and she then gave me to understand that she meant to turn over a new leaf. On that occasion I frankly confessed that I had formed a precisely similar determination, — and now that I recollect, it was on that same afternoon I came up to call upon you. I think, if I remember aright, that I meant to make you a confidante of my resolve, and even consult you in the matter, but I know not what humour it was which seized upon me, inducing me to postpone all discourse upon the subject. When I called upon you again the other day, it was with the same intent, but your brother was here all the time, and so I did not choose to make you my confidante or to ask your advice on that occasion. And now for my anecdote about Mrs. Baines. As I was leaving home this morning, I told her that I had something of importance to whisper in her ear. You should have seen how grave and serious the old lady suddenly became; her air had quite a diplomatic mysteriousness about it. She was evidently so proud of being admitted into my confidence and entrusted with my secrets. I began by reminding her that for the last few months I had grown quite steady, and had become a model of temperance and frugality in my habits, that I had renounced the society of all my former companions, and had learned to hate dissipation as much as, I am sorry to say, I once loved it. Mrs. Baines was pleased to speak in terms of cordial approval, and with a motherly kind of interest, too, relative to my altered conduct. I then came to the point, and asked her if she did not think that I should do well to marry — Ah! you have dropped your work. Permit me."

Ariadne had indeed let her work fall, and as she stooped to pick it up, her cheeks, which were burning with blushes, for a moment came in contact with the cheek of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had also stooped for the same purpose. She, however, was the first to snatch up the work, over which her head was immediately bent much lower than before, as if she were trying hard to conceal her countenance as much as possible.

" Well," continued the baronet, not taking any notice —

at least in words — of that transient contact of his cheek against hers, " on asking Mrs. Baines's advice relative to marriage, she at once declared it was the best step I could possibly take, and she reminded me that of her own accord she had volunteered similar advice some months ago. I bade her observe that if a Lady Huntingdon were introduced into my household, her authority as housekeeper might perhaps be diminished, but she at once declared that she would risk such an eventuality as that. In short, the worthy woman assured me it was her conviction that my happiness would be best consulted by means of marriage, and that if the lady on whom I might fix did not wish to retain a housekeeper, she (Mrs. Baines) would cheerfully resign her post. Now what do you think of that, Ariadne — Miss Varian, I mean? "

" I think," responded the damsel, in a voice that was very low and very tremulous, and she spoke, too, without raising her head, " that Mrs. Baines has acted in a most disinterested manner, but only as I should have expected she would have done, from what I know of her."

" And now tell me, Miss Ariadne," continued the baronet, " would you also advise me to marry? You do not answer. I must admit that it is a somewhat singular question, or it may appear so, at least, but do tell me if you think that I am capable of ensuring the happiness of any young lady whom I may love? "

" Yes, if you sincerely love her," replied Ariadne; and now the stitches she was making were a thousand times worse than ever.

" I do love her, I have long loved her," exclaimed the baronet. " And now I am resolved to offer her my hand and lay my fortune at her feet. Ariadne, dearest Ariadne, you know whom I mean. Will you be mine? "

Again the work was dropped in the same kind of confusion as before, but this time neither of them stooped to pick it up, for the baronet caught the blushing girl in his arms and strained her to his breast. That she did not immediately disengage herself was a sufficient proof that she accepted his love and loved him in return.

When the brother came back from the City, he found the baronet and Ariadne seated near the window shaded by the Venetian blind, and while there was the radiance of

honest joy upon the countenance of the former, there was the telltale blush of a virgin's happy love upon the cheeks of the latter.

"Theodore," Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately said, "while you have been to the City to find a situation, I have found an angel to become my wife. Ariadne has listened to my honourable proposals, and unless you say nay, has consented to become Lady Huntingdon."

"Noblest-hearted and most generous of men!" exclaimed Theodore, seizing the baronet's hand and wringing it with violence in the enthusiasm of his feelings, "how can I ever express my gratitude for what you have done? Ariadne, my beloved sister, sincerely, oh, most sincerely do I congratulate you upon having gained the affections of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. It is not a mere subordinate situation on the Continent which he has procured me; it is the chief management of that branch house which I fancied I was to enter as clerk, and it is an income not of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, but of four hundred a year that I am to receive. Nor is this all. Our benefactor, your future husband, Ariadne, has given security on my behalf in the amount of five thousand pounds to Mr. Chapman. Oh, never was generosity more noble than this!"

Ariadne could not give utterance to a word. She was well-nigh overpowered by her feelings, but taking Sir Douglas Huntingdon's hand, she pressed it to her lips, and that action on her part was ten thousand times more eloquent than all the powers of speech could have been.

It was a happy little party of three that sat down that afternoon to the dinner-table in the parlour of the cottage at Islington, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon perhaps never enjoyed a bliss more real, more sincere, or more satisfactory in all his life. Reader, he did not take his departure that evening until he had received from Ariadne's lips her assent that the bridal should be celebrated at the expiration of three weeks, so that her brother, who was compelled to leave England shortly, might be present at it.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DOCTOR DUPONT'S ESTABLISHMENT

At a distance of about two miles from Geneva there stood a large white building upon the slope of an eminence, situated in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, and commanding a beautiful view of Lake Leman. Those pleasure-grounds were surrounded by a very high wall, and the iron gates at the entrance-lodge were always kept carefully shut, opening only for the purpose of egress or ingress. The mansion had evidently been enlarged at different times, and seemed far too extensive for the private residence of even a family possessing enormous wealth. In short, this establishment of which we are speaking was a private lunatic asylum.

In one of the many chambers which the establishment contained two young ladies were seated near the barred window, gazing vacantly forth upon the prospect without. They were well dressed, and the chamber itself was handsomely furnished. Vases of flowers made the air fragrant, fruits and decanters of crystal water were upon the central table. There were musical instruments, books, and pictures scattered about, but in no unseemly disorder; and an alcove, or very large recess at one extremity of the apartment, contained three couches. Near the door an elderly female, stout in person and very strongly built, was seated. She was engaged in reading a book, but from time to time she glanced toward the two young ladies at the window, evidently to observe what they were doing.

The reader has doubtless already guessed that the two young ladies referred to were Agatha and Julia Owen. Through the generosity of the Princess of Wales, who had not merely studied, but likewise practised the divine maxim

of "Forget and forgive," they had been removed from the common madhouse in the Genevese prison to this private asylum, which was kept by one of the most humane and enlightened physicians of the age. Doctor Dupont, a Frenchman by birth, was the proprietor of this establishment, and having all his life studied psychological subjects, he had adopted a régime of mild and indulgent treatment toward his patients, instead of the old system of coercion and cruelty. The consequence was that the strait-waistcoat was seldom used within the walls of this asylum, and as for blows or corporal punishment, such atrocities were never dreamed of. There were two departments, one for males, and the other for females, and these were subdivided into many chambers, to suit the various degrees of insanity by which the patients were affected, and also any other circumstances of their position. Thus, in the case of the two sisters, one chamber was assigned to them both, and their guardian, the stout woman reading near the door, was ever in attendance upon them. In short, this female keeper acted alike as servant and custodian, waiting upon the young ladies at their meals, following them when they walked in the pleasure-grounds, and sleeping in the middle bed at night.

When Agatha and Julia were first brought to Doctor Dupont's asylum, they were in a perfectly rabid state of insanity, but the results of kind and humane treatment soon made themselves manifest; and now, at the expiration of six weeks from the date of their admission, we find the two unhappy young ladies in a comparatively composed and tranquil condition. Not that their minds had recovered their healthy equilibrium, or that their ideas were rescued from the whirl of confusion, but the savage instincts which had made them rave in maddened frenzy, and not only threaten their own lives but likewise the safety of all who approached them, were completely lulled down, and though still deprived of the light of reason, they at least appeared to be harmless.

They knew each other, and were, indeed, always together. Side by side did they constantly remain. If one rose from the window-seat and approached the table, the other would accompany her; whatever the one partook of, the other selected the same thing. Sometimes Agatha would sit down

at the piano and play some air, extemporaneously composed; immediately she quitted the music-stool, Julia would occupy it, and play precisely the same notes. The recollection of all the airs and musical pieces they had once known was utterly gone, but with the remarkable eccentricity of minds that are aberrated, they could thus remember what each other played at the time. It was the same with the books which lay about the room. If Agatha took up a volume, Julia would take up another; then when Agatha laid aside hers, Julia would take it up instead of her own, while Agatha would instantaneously possess herself of the one her sister had just laid down.

They awoke at the same hour in the morning, and without the interchange of a word seemed always to be simultaneously prompted by the same desire as to walking out in the pleasure-grounds, taking refreshments, or retiring to rest. In those two shattered minds there was a wondrous identity of thought and feeling; in those two bruised and almost broken hearts there seemed to exist a common inclination, an invariable oneness of purpose. They seldom spoke to each other, and when they did, it was in the language of the insane, giving utterance to wild rhapsodies and the strangest notions, and yet they always seemed to understand each other. They would sit for hours gazing forth from the windows with their eyes apparently riveted upon the same object in the distance, and yet Doctor Dupont's experience told him that on these occasions they were both alike gazing upon vacancy.

There would have been something deeply interesting, as well as touchingly pathetic, in the case of these two sisters, were it possible to divest the mind of that feeling of loathing and abhorrence which their profligacies and their wickedness were but too well calculated to engender. Indeed, all persons in the republic of Geneva who were aware of the past history of the two sisters, as developed during the trials of Mrs. Ranger and the three fishers of men, were astonished that the Princess of Wales should have shown so much generosity toward these young women who had entered with such direful purpose into the pay of her enemies, and the very fact of this excessive benevolence on the part of her Royal Highness was actually made a handle against her by those who had been led to think lightly of her character. In fact, this

unfortunate princess was always destined to suffer from the seeming imprudence of her generosities, her very virtues thus raising, as it were, the voice of accusation against her. So was it in the case of Bergami, whom through motives of goodness she took into her service, and so also was it now in the case of the two young ladies whom through the sincerest commiseration she placed at her own expense in Doctor Dupont's lunatic asylum. Suspicious people, and those who were fond of gossiping and scandal-mongering, shook their heads knowingly, saying, " After all, the princess must have done something in which these girls were her confidantes, otherwise she would not now provide for them so handsomely. But she doubtless fears that if she abandons them altogether, they would turn around upon her if ever they recovered their reason, and would proclaim all they knew.

But to continue our tale. It was, as we have already hinted, about six weeks from the admission of Agatha and Julia into the asylum, and about two months from the date of those dreadful deeds which closed in the fearful catastrophe of their sister Emma's murder, that we now peep into their chamber and behold them seated together at the window. It was the hour of noon, and the September sun was shining gloriously upon the wild expanse of scenery that embraced so many and such varied features of interest. There was the charming city of Geneva, there was that crescent-shaped inland sea, there were the eminences on the opposite shore, dotted with villages, farmhouses, and villas, and there, too, were the snow-capped Alpine heights in the distance. But the two young ladies beheld nought of all that interesting scene; their eyes were fixed upon vacancy, and there was nothing in their thoughts.

At the same time Mrs. Owen and Mary were wending their way from Geneva toward the lunatic asylum. A month had elapsed since they had arrived in the republican city, and each day they had called at Doctor Dupont's establishment to ascertain whether that gentleman would permit them to see Agatha and Julia. Hitherto, however, he had been compelled to interdict such a meeting, under the apprehension that it might tend most alarmingly to unsettle the minds of his patients. On the one hand, it was possible that Agatha and Julia might not recognize their

mother and sister, but, on the other hand, it was far more probable that they would, and were such the case, the treatment which Doctor Dupont was pursuing might be seriously interfered with. As a matter of course, Mrs. Owen and Mary had yielded to these representations, but, as we have already observed, day after day did they visit the asylum in the hope of receiving a favourable response.

"I have a presentiment," said Mary to her mother, as they approached the establishment on the occasion to which we are now specially referring, "that we are this day to behold my poor afflicted sisters," and as she gave utterance to these words the tears rained down her cheeks.

"Do not give way to your affliction in this manner," said Mrs. Owen, scarcely able to suppress her own convulsive sobs. "You unnerve me, you distract me."

"My dear mother, I cannot possibly control my grief," answered Mary. "Let us sit down for a few minutes upon this verdant bank, and endeavour to compose our feelings ere we proceed any farther."

The mother and daughter accordingly seated themselves beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree, and there they gave free vent to that bitter affliction which was rending their hearts.

It was by the side of the main road leading toward Dijon that they were thus seated, and so absorbed were they in their affliction that neither of them heard the sounds of approaching wheels until a post-chaise, coming from the direction of the French frontier and proceeding toward Geneva, was almost close up to the spot where they were seated. The occupant of the chaise was a young gentleman of genteel appearance and tolerably good-looking. He was, moreover, an Englishman, and as he happened to be gazing out of the window nearest to the two ladies at the time, he was immediately struck by observing them thus giving way to a grief which was evidently of no ordinary bitterness. He called out to the postilion to stop, and now Mrs. Owen and Mary sprang to their feet, hastily dried their tears, and were hurrying onward to escape the observation which they had thus so disagreeably attracted, when the traveller, leaping out of the chaise, accosted them with a salutation so courteous and words so polite as well as sympathetic that

it would have been an act of rudeness on their part to have avoided him altogether.

"Pardon me, ladies," said the young gentleman, in the English language, "but if I be not much mistaken in your appearance, you must be fellow countrywomen of mine, and if so, meeting you thus in a foreign land and seeing you plunged in such bitter grief, I cannot pursue my journey without asking if my services can be made in any way available for your benefit."

"On behalf of my daughter and myself," said Mrs. Owen, with all the courtesy of a thorough gentlewoman, "I return you my sincerest thanks for your kindness and generosity. But ours is an affliction which admits not of relief, even on the part of a friendly sympathizer."

"You will at all events, madam," said the young gentleman, "pardon my indiscretion for having intruded myself upon your notice? Believe me, it was through no impertinent curiosity."

"Such an assurance is altogether unnecessary," answered Mrs. Owen, "and considering the generous interest which you have thus manifested in our behalf, it would be at least discourteous, if not positively unhandsome, to evade an explanation of that grief which elicited your sympathy. Alas! sir, if you be a stranger in these parts, you are unaware that the immense establishment which you may observe on the slope of this eminence on the left hand is an asylum for those who have lost their reason."

"Ah! pardon me, madam," exclaimed the young Englishman, observing that Mrs. Owen stopped short in a convulsion of grief, and that Mary had turned aside to conceal the fresh outburst of affliction to which she was giving vent. "Instead of soothing you, I have forced you into explanations which only tend to revive your sorrow. I understand you, madam. You have some relative in that place?"

"I have, I have," answered Mrs. Owen, hysterically, and the unhappy woman wrung her hands. "Two daughters, this dear girl's sisters," and she pointed toward Mary.

"Enough, madam," said the Englishman, "dwell not upon the melancholy topic. And now, think me not indiscreet if I again observe that should I in any way be able to prove useful to you I shall be most happy. Had we met thus in our own native England, and under the same cir-

cumstances, I should not have stopped to make those inquiries upon which I have now ventured, but here, in a foreign country, it is different. This, madam, is my excuse for again proffering my services in any way that they could be made available."

"Once more do I return you my sincerest gratitude," answered Mrs. Owen, "but there is nothing that any human being can do to allay our affliction."

The young man made a low bow, and reëntered the post-chaise, which immediately drove on toward Geneva.

"Come, dearest Mary, let us proceed," said Mrs. Owen, as soon as this little incident had terminated. "Was it not kind of that young gentleman thus to display so much interest in our behalf?"

Mary gave her assent to the question, and, composing her feelings as well as she was able, accompanied her mother to the gate of the pleasure-grounds belonging to the asylum. The old porter, who immediately came forth from the lodge, and who knew both the ladies well from the circumstance of their calling every day during the past month, immediately said, "I have good news for you on this occasion. The doctor has given orders that if you call you are to be admitted."

"My presentiment was correct," whispered Mary to her mother. "I knew that we should see my poor sisters to-day."

"Now, for Heaven's sake, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen, when, having passed through the iron gates, they were proceeding up the wide carriage-way to the entrance of the asylum, "do your best to restrain your feelings in the presence of those whom we are about to see. We know not how pernicious may be the effects of any violent display of anguish on our parts."

"Mother, I will do my best," responded Mary, in an almost dying voice, "but the trial will be a severe one."

They now reached the handsome portico of the edifice, and were at once admitted into an elegantly furnished waiting-room which opened from the spacious entrance-hall. There they were speedily joined by Doctor Dupont, who was an old man with a kind and benevolent look, an air which though mild nevertheless proved him to be capable of great firmness, and also a most cheerful as well as winning voice.

"At last, ladies," he said, saluting them with the profound respect of true French politeness, "you are to see those in whom you are so deeply interested. Under my system of treatment they have been brought to the most satisfactory calmness of mind, and although it is impossible to foretell what effect a meeting with you may have upon them, yet I do not feel justified in excluding you any longer from their presence."

"But their reason, doctor, their reason?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "Think you that it will ever be restored?"

"Madam, I should not be doing my duty," was the grave response, "if I buoyed you up with hopes that may never be fulfilled. I am therefore bound to inform you," and he was about to draw her aside, so that Mary might not overhear what he was going to say, "that your daughters —"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, let there be no secrets with me," cried the young maiden. "Suspense under such circumstances were far less tolerable than a knowledge of the worst. Besides," she added, in a quick, hysterical tone of mental agony, "I already gather from your looks, Doctor Dupont, a presage of what is passing in your mind."

"Yes, you must speak it in my poor girl's presence," said Mrs. Owen.

"In that case," continued the physician, "it is my painful duty to inform you both that, from all the symptoms by which I am enabled to judge, I much fear that the minds of the two young ladies have received a shock from which they will never recover."

Mary said nothing, but clasped her hands despairingly, while Mrs. Owen turned aside, and sinking upon a chair, was for some minutes convulsed with grief.

"Now, my dear madam," said the doctor, at length breaking silence, "and you also, Miss Owen, I must beg and implore of you both to put as strong a restraint upon your feelings as possible. Remember, I am by no means certain as to the result of the interview which is about to take place. With all my experience I can foretell nothing upon that point. It may prove beneficial, or the very reverse; it may soothe, or it may excite. If my two fair patients recognize their mother and their sister, they will most probably melt into softness, and the effect would be advantageous; but, unfortunately, in these cases the very persons who ought to be

loved the most are sometimes regarded as the objects of sudden aversion, hatred, and terror. You will therefore both perceive the absolute necessity for exercising an authoritative command over yourselves at the approaching interview."

Mrs. Owen and Mary promised to follow Doctor Dupont's injunctions as well as they were able, and when he thought they were sufficiently tranquillized, he conducted them out of the waiting-room. They traversed the hall, ascended a magnificent marble staircase, and then proceeded along a carpeted passage having an array of doors on both sides. Presently they stopped at one near the end of the passage, and here the doctor paused, placing his finger upon his lip to remind Mrs. Owen and Mary of the injunctions he had given. He then knocked at the door, and it was almost immediately opened by the female custodian who had charge of the two young ladies. Doctor Dupont entered first, Mrs. Owen and Mary following close behind. The reader may imagine if he can, for we have no power to describe, the feelings which now swelled in the heart of that mother who knew that she herself was the primal cause of everything which had hurried on her two unhappy children to the catastrophe of a madhouse; nor can we depict the emotions which the innocent and tender-hearted Mary Owen felt at thus encountering her sisters in such a place and under such circumstances. The mother and daughter had wept over the tomb of the murdered Emma in the cemetery without the walls of Geneva, and deep as their anguish had been there, it assuredly was not more profound than that which they experienced in crossing the threshold of the chamber containing the living Agatha and Julia, but living only in a state of mental confusion.

The two objects of this visit were still seated at the window, still appearing to gaze forth upon the splendid scenery without, but still looking upon dull vacuity. They heard not the door open, or if they did, paid no attention to the circumstance. Doctor Dupont motioned with his hand for Mrs. Owen and Mary to remain near the door, while he accosted Agatha and Julia.

"Well, young ladies," he said, in his blandest, kindest, most soothing tones, "what is it that thus engages your attention?"

"Methought I beheld angels flying through the air," said Agatha, slowly turning her head and raising her eyes toward the physician's countenance. "They were all beautiful beings, with white wings shining as if made of silver, and they were dressed in azure garments which streamed out in a long train in the track of their feet."

"And I also beheld beautiful spirits passing through the air," said Julia, turning around with the same slowness of manner and gazing up with similar vacancy into the doctor's countenance. "I fancied also that they had beautiful silver wings, and azure robes spreading out into a cloud behind them — oh, it was wonderful!"

Mrs. Owen and Mary were now able to behold the countenances of Agatha and Julia, and hear their voices. Those countenances were so pale as to be devoid of all vital colouring, and those voices were so low, plaintive, and melancholy that it rent the hearts of the mother and sister to hear them. But still they subdued their feelings with a strength of mind that even astonished themselves; and now, at a signal from the physician, they slowly approached the window.

"Here are friends come to see you," said the doctor, his voice more gentle and more soothing than even at first; and yet both Mrs. Owen and Mary could perceive in his accents, as well as in his manner, that this was the crisis which he feared, — that is to say, the moment was now come when the effect of the visit would be immediately shown by his two unfortunate patients.

Agatha and Julia, at the same instant, in precisely the same manner, and as if in obedience to a feeling common to them both, slowly averted their looks from the doctor's countenance, and bent them upon Mrs. Owen and Mary. Then they both started, as if suddenly galvanized by the same electric wire, and also at the very selfsame moment; and still as if inspired by this singular identity of feeling or instinct, they sprang from their seats, shrieking forth, "It is Mary, our sister!"

Bounding toward the young damsel, they both wound their arms about her neck, covered her with fervid, even frenzied caresses, addressed to her the most passionately endearing epithets, and shed floods of tears. Then Agatha embraced Mary all to herself, and then Julia took her turn in the same demonstration of enthusiastic love.

" Oh, my sisters, my dearest, dearest sisters! " exclaimed the young damsel, giving back those fond caresses with an equal fondness.

" Come and sit down with us," said Agatha, " and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you."

" Yes, come and sit down with us," echoed Julia, " and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you."

" Dearest sisters," answered Mary, almost blinded by her tears and suffocated with her sobs, " here is our mother come to see you also."

" Yes, my poor girls, it is I, your mother, your almost heart-broken mother! " exclaimed Mrs. Owen, rushing forward to embrace her two afflicted children.

" What, you our mother! " shrieked forth Agatha, her whole appearance changing with an awful suddenness, as if the spirit of a fiend had in a moment entered her frame. " No, no, not you our mother! You are a demoness, a she-devil, an old witch, a vile, monstrous hag! I know you well! Avaunt! avaunt! "

" No, no, you are not our mother! " were the thrilling echoes that now rang piercingly from the frenzied Julia's lips. " You are a demoness, a she-devil, a hideous hag. Avaunt! I know you well! Avaunt! "

And then the two sisters, taking each other's hand, stood side by side, as if in the reliance of mutual protection against that mother whom they did not recognize, but whose presence had thus so terribly excited them. As for Mrs. Owen herself, she covered her face with her hands, staggered back against the wall, and sobbed aloud, while poor Mary stood at a little distance, transfixed with horror and dismay.

" My dear young friends," said Doctor Dupont, accosting Agatha and Julia, " you have recognized your sister; are you not glad to see her? And will you not believe me when I assure you that the other lady is your mother? " he added, very slowly, and earnestly watching the looks of his patients.

" Our mother! — no, no! " again shrieked forth Agatha, all the frenzy of rage blazing up again in a moment. " I tell you she is not our mother! She is the old demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong."

" Yes, the demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong," were the terrible reverberations thrilling from Julia's lips.

"O God, have mercy upon me!" cried Mrs. Owen; and not observing the imperious signal which Doctor Dupont now suddenly made for her to withdraw, she sprang forward, threw herself upon her knees at the feet of her two lost and ruined children, and with wild looks and outstretched arms, shrieked forth, "Pardon me, pardon me, my deeply injured daughters! Forgive your miserable, miserable mother!"

Strange was the effect now suddenly produced upon Agatha and Julia. The expression of frenzied horror slowly faded away from their features, their eyes lost the maniac fires which they had ere now flashed forth, and the increasing placidity of their looks indicated a slowly returning tranquillity of mind. The doctor, who had been upon the point of ordering Mrs. Owen forth from the room, or even dragging her thence if she would not leave of her own accord, now watched with the deepest interest and attention this new phase in his two young patients' conduct, while Mary looked on with heightening hope in her bosom. Nor was even the stout female custodian indifferent to what was passing, and Mrs. Owen still remained upon her knees, while her two deeply wronged daughters were looking down upon her with a gradually increasing clearness and lucidity of gaze. There was something touchingly poetic and beautifully statuesque in the attitude which each of the two sisters took as thus, side by side and hand in hand, they stood with their eyes bent down on their parent's upturned countenance. And for more than a minute did this strange scene last, amidst a profound silence. The attitudes and looks of Agatha and Julia were identical; they were exactly the same, and it seemed as if it were but one mind influencing the two animated forms.

At length Agatha slowly raised her disengaged hand to her brow, to which she pressed it as if to collect or steady the thoughts that were agitating confusedly in her brain; and precisely at the same moment, and with the same slow gesture, did Julia raise also the hand which she had disengaged, and place it in a like manner to her white forehead.

Doctor Dupont flung a quick glance upon Mary and the female keeper, as if to intimate that this was the crisis upon which everything depended. And a crisis indeed it was, but one the turn of which was little foreseen by any individual present.

" O God, it is indeed our mother! " suddenly shrieked forth the two sisters, both at the same instant, and in blending tones of the wildest frenzy.

But the next instant Agatha staggered back, with a ghastly paleness suddenly seizing upon her, and fell heavily upon the carpet, the blood flowing from her lips.

" Great Heaven, she is dying! " shrieked the horror-stricken Mary, rushing toward her eldest sister.

" No, no, keep back, keep back! " screamed Julia, forcibly pushing Mary away; and then she threw herself upon the panting, convulsing form of Agatha.

All was now horror and distress on the part of Mrs. Owen and Mary, for it was but too clear that the unfortunate Agatha had burst a blood-vessel. The doctor and the female keeper forcibly removed Julia from the dying sister to whom she clung; but, oh, more horror, more distress, more terror and dismay! Was the blood on Julia's lips but the stain of that flowing from Agatha's mouth, or was it her own life-blood oozing forth from the fountains of a bursting heart?

The two sisters were speedily placed each on her respective couch, and all that human skill could do for them was performed by Doctor Dupont. Vain endeavour! The same excitement had produced in each the same effect, and both were dying. Mrs. Owen and Mary were well-nigh frenzied with grief. They first bent over one, then over the other, of those loved beings on whom death was laying its hand, and in the physician's looks they beheld no hope. Neither Agatha nor Julia spoke another word, but about twenty minutes after the bursting of the blood-vessels which sent the stream of life pouring from their lips, they made a movement, each upon her own couch, as if seeking to clasp something in their arms. By this action they turned themselves toward each other, and with a last expiring effort they stretched out their arms to one another. Then closing their eyes, they sank imperceptibly into that sleep from which on earth there is no awakening.

It was in the forenoon of the second day after this catastrophe that Mrs. Owen and Mary entered alone together into the chamber of death, and knelt down by the side of the couch on which the two dead sisters lay. They had both been placed upon the same bed, Doctor Dupont, with what

may be termed a poetic delicacy of sentiment, symbolizing in this arrangement that identity of feeling which had made the two sisters cling to each other from the first moment they had entered his asylum. There they lay, stretched out in the garments of the grave, the snowy whiteness of the shrouds being not whiter than the marble countenances of the dead girls. Yes, side by side they lay, like two alabaster statues carved upon the same monument.

Their features, fixed in the sleep of death, wore looks serene and placid. The world's cares ruffled them no more; the passions which had stirred their frail natures excited them no longer; they seemed, indeed, as if no other expression than that of innocence had ever been upon their faces. Life's storm had sunk into an utter lull beneath the palsying hand of death.

And by the side of that couch where the two sisters thus lay motionless and statue-like, side by side, knelt the mother and surviving sister. There was no passionate outpouring of frenzied affliction now, and the solemn silence of the chamber of death was broken only by the low, half-subdued, but not the less convulsing sobs which indicated the well-nigh suffocating grief of those anguished mourners. Long did they kneel there, by that bed on which the two departed girls lay stretched, and in the depths of their souls they prayed fervently and with a most unfeigned sincerity. Poor Mary had nought wherewith to reproach herself, but the mother, the wretched, miserable mother, had everything in the form of dire remorse to lacerate her heart. Then did she feel that in this world there may be condign punishment for wrongs perpetrated and sins committed, for her conscience was bitter and merciless indeed in its self-accusings.

They quitted the room at length, having taken a last long look at the countenances of the dead, those countenances to which they also pressed their lips. It was with slow and mournful pace, as if with leaden limbs dragged along painfully, that they thus issued from the chamber. But when they reached the passage outside, having noiselessly closed the door behind them, all the wildness of their grief burst forth, and for some minutes they leaned against the wall, weeping and sobbing, and giving vent to the most agonizing lamentations. Then they slowly passed away, and entering the hired vehicle

that was waiting for them at the gate, returned to their lodgings in Geneva.

Three days afterward the remains of the two sisters were consigned to the same grave where the murdered Emma already slept, but no pen can describe the paroxysm of mental anguish which the surviving sister and the miserable mother endured when they beheld the two coffins consigned to the last home of the dead ones.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LAKE LEMAN

A FEW days after the funeral, Mrs. Owen and Mary, attired in their deep mourning garments, embarked on board the packet-vessel which plied between Geneva and Lausanne. It was ten o'clock in the forenoon, and the weather was inclement and threatening. The sky was overcast with dark clouds, and a sombre gloom appeared to rest upon the slopes and eminences on the farther shore of the lake, thus giving a cheerless aspect to the scenery that in the sunshine was wont to be so fresh, so varied, and so beautiful. It was a small vessel, and there were but few passengers on board, but amongst them was one who surveyed Mrs. Owen and Mary with mingled interest and attention. This was the same young Englishman whom they had encountered a fortnight back, when on their way to Doctor Dupont's asylum. He saw that they were in mourning, and observed also the deep affliction that was expressed in their looks. He therefore naturally concluded that some calamity, greater even than any they had anticipated at the time he met them, had since occurred. But from motives of delicacy he did not like to obtrude himself upon their notice, and therefore from his station at a short distance on the deck he stood regarding them with mingled curiosity, interest, and commiseration.

The beauty of Mary, which was apparent despite the grief that consumed her at the time, had struck this young gentleman on the occasion when, alighting from his post-chaise, he had accosted her mother and herself on the highroad to Geneva, and more than once during the fortnight which had since elapsed had her image recurred to his mind. Notwithstanding the sympathy which her present appearance, in mourning and in visible grief, excited in his breast, this

feeling was not without a mingled sentiment of pleasure at beholding her again, and the longer he gazed upon her sweetly beautiful and pensive countenance, the deeper was the interest which he felt on her behalf. Presently it struck him that the captain of the vessel might happen to know who the young lady and her mother were; and as he had found, when first coming on board, that the captain happened to understand a little English, the young gentleman accosted him and made the inquiry concerning the two young ladies. The captain did happen to have learned who they were, for the whole transactions with which the name of Owen was so painfully associated had all along sustained a considerable excitement in Geneva. The captain therefore was enabled to gratify the young Englishman's curiosity, and as he himself had already heard much of what related to the unfortunate affairs wherein the name of Owen was mixed up (save and except the death of the two sisters themselves), his interest in the lady and her daughter was still more excited than at first. He now, however, learned from the captain's lips that the two girls, Agatha and Julia, whose names had been so unfortunately blended with the horrible occurrences at Geneva, had recently died, and therefore the reason of the mother's and surviving sister's mourning weeds was now no longer an enigma.

The passage from Geneva to Lausanne is not a long one, the distance by water being scarcely thirty miles, and at the expiration of three hours the port of destination was nearly reached. During this interval Mrs. Owen and Mary had remained seated on the spot where they had placed themselves when first embarking, and being the whole time engaged either with their mournful reflections or else in the melancholy discourse to which those thoughts led, they took no notice of any of their fellow passengers. They therefore had not perceived the young Englishman on board, and Mary little suspected she was the object of so much sympathy and interest. Nor had they even observed that the aspect of the heavens had been gradually getting more dark and menacing, and the waters of the lake more troubled. Suddenly the clumsily built vessel began to toss and heave in a manner that all in a moment produced a perfect consternation on board. Several of the passengers were thrown off their feet, and two or three narrowly escaped being

pitched over the bulwarks. The women screamed, the men gave vent to ejaculations of alarm, and the captain issued his orders to the sailors with a rapidity of utterance and a vehemence of gesticulation which fully proved his conviction that some danger was imminent. Mrs. Owen and Mary were startled from their mournful reveries, and they flung anxious looks around to ascertain the cause of the sudden alarm and the peril which occasioned it. An individual at once sprang to their side, earnestly bidding them hold fast to the back of the seat, which was fixed upon the deck, and they immediately recognized the young Englishman who had shown so much politeness and sympathy toward them on a former occasion.

He himself, being a stranger in Switzerland, was altogether unacquainted with the nature of the impending danger, but we may as well at once explain it to our readers. Lake Leman is at certain seasons of the year subject to a sudden agitation of its surface produced by subaqueous winds, these winds blowing with much violence from the depths of the lake, and stirring up the mass of water into high and dangerous billows. Whenever this phenomenon discloses itself, squalls from the south usually follow without much loss of time, and these often sweep with terrific fury over that inland sea. It was to guard against the effects of any abruptly arising gust that the captain had issued such quick orders and with such vehement gesticulation, so that the sails might be furled, the topmasts struck, and every precaution adopted against whatever emergency should arise.

Nor was the danger long in manifesting itself with frightful reality. For while the clumsy vessel was tossing and pitching on the upheaving billows, the clouds above the mountains of Savoy, far away to the south, seemed suddenly to part in twain, and then the next moment, or, indeed, quick as the eye can wink, the wildly gushing blast swept with terrific violence over the surface of the lake. Immediately the packet-ship heeled over and fell completely on its broadside, the top of the mast touching the water. Terrific cries and piercing shrieks rent the air, and in a moment nearly every soul on board was struggling in the lake, battling for life amidst the waves. The careering billows seemed rushing madly on, dashing over the sinking ship, and then suddenly

merging into one vast whirlpool, in which the drowning and the swimming were for a few instants swept around and around as if they were mere straws upon the surging eddies. The captain and the sailors had alone managed to cling fast to the ship at the instant she went over, but they were now fighting for their own lives amidst the dangers of the wreck and against the fury of the storm, so that they were unable, even if willing, to render any assistance to the passengers.

The catastrophe was witnessed from the shore at the foot of the eminence on which Lausanne is built, and two or three boats speedily put off. But in the meantime the greater number of the passengers, men and women, had been engulfed in the depths of that boiling lake, and amongst them was Mrs. Owen. Mary was however caught in the arms of one who swam with strength and expertness, and encumbered though he were by the fair object of his solicitude, it nevertheless seemed as if he acquired additional energy from the feeling of responsibility that her life as well as his own depended upon his coolness, his presence of mind, and the exertions he might make. Fortunately Mary was insensible, and thus she marred not his progress, nor increased the danger of both their predicaments by wildly clinging to him, as she would instinctively have done if in full possession of her senses. Sustaining her in one arm, he struck out with the other, his eye fixed upon the nearest boat that was approaching from the Lausanne shore; and luckily, when the violence of the gust had expended itself, the waves ceased to break in surges around him, but rolled only in a long, continuous swell. To be brief, he succeeded in meeting the boat, into which his inanimate charge was first lifted by the two fishermen who rowed the little bark, and in a few moments he also was in safety.

The packet-vessel went down, causing a fresh whirlpool and then a heavy swell, but the captain, together with his sailors and some eight or ten of the passengers, including three or four women, were rescued from a watery grave by the boats which had put off. Full of an intense anxiety was the glance which the young Englishman flung around upon the survivors of the catastrophe when all who could be saved were saved and safe in the boats, but amongst them he beheld not Mrs. Owen, and he therefore knew, as indeed he had already suspected, that she was amongst the missing.

Before the boats reached the landing-place on the Lausanne shore, Mary awoke to life, and as her senses returned, accompanied with painful sensations and short, convulsive gaspings, the light of memory also burned up again. It was with a strange and startling suddenness that she sprang up from the half-embrace in which the young Englishman held her, and threw a wild glance around. The other boats were close by that in which she and her companion were, and with one brief, sweeping look did she learn the worst. Her mother was not to be seen. Then she flung her horrified glance upon the Englishman, and in his countenance she read the fatal confirmation of the truth. Her mother was gone, and not more piercing was any shriek that had ascended up to Heaven from the engulfed passengers at the moment the vessel upset than was the wild scream which now thrilled forth from the lips of the orphan girl. But while it was still vibrating in the air, she fell suddenly, deprived of consciousness, as if stricken by a thunderbolt, and was caught in the arms of him who had saved her from the waters of Lake Leman.

When she again recovered her senses, she found herself lying in a bed in a well-furnished room, with a physician and a nurse by the side of the couch. She was in a hotel at Lausanne, whither the young Englishman had borne her, and where he had surrounded her with all the requisite attentions. But on thus reawakening to consciousness, poor Mary felt that she had better have perished in Lake Leman than have been rescued only to experience the orphan's fate. Her grief for the loss of her mother knew no bounds, and she seemed beyond all consolation.

Thus three or four days passed, but at length the violence of her anguish diminished, not because she felt less than at first, but because she perceived the necessity of resigning herself to the will of Heaven. Moreover, the thought gradually stole into her mind that the more she gave way to her affliction, the longer would she remain dependent upon the kindness of the generous-hearted friend who had not merely saved her life, but was continuing to manifest so sincere an interest in her behalf. There was another reason, too, which urged her to summon all her fortitude to her aid, and this was the discovery of her mother's corpse, which, together with those of several of the other unfortunate pas-

sengers, had been washed ashore. Accordingly, on the fourth day after the catastrophe, Mary quitted her chamber, and now she met her kind friend for the first time since she had been borne to the hotel. We will not pause to detail the terms in which she expressed her gratitude to this young gentleman. Suffice it to say, that even in the depth of her affliction, he discovered traits in her character which riveted the sympathy he had previously experienced in her behalf, and convinced him she was altogether very different in conduct and in principles from her three unfortunate sisters who lay buried in the cemetery at Geneva. On the present occasion, also, was it that Mary for the first time learned the name of the Englishman, and this name was Theodore Varian.

In the most delicate manner did Theodore beseech Mary to entrust him with the superintendence of her mother's funeral, and the poor girl was too grateful for the offer not to yield a ready assent. When the obsequies were over, her mind speedily recovered much of its former firmness of tone; for when she was enabled to sit down and reflect, in the solitude of her own chamber, upon the catastrophe which had left her an orphan in the wide world, the conviction insensibly grew upon her that, after all, it might be a humane and wise dispensation of Providence. For how could Mrs. Owen have ever enjoyed an hour's tranquillity upon earth again, after the frightful tragedies which had deprived her of her three eldest daughters? As for happiness, that never could have been her lot, and to have lingered on a miserable existence, dragging herself, as it were, over the thorny pathways of remorse, oh, such a fate would have been awful indeed!

It was such a train of meditations as these which led poor Mary to accept with resigned feeling her own orphan destiny, and the longer she reflected thereon, the more serene grew her martyrized mind. But now what course was she to adopt? The boxes containing her clothes and the money which her mother had brought with her from England had been engulfed in the lake, but the generosity of Theodore Varian, delicately exercised through the medium of the landlady of the hotel, had not only furnished Mary with all the funds requisite for the refitting of her wardrobe, but likewise for the disbursement of the funeral charges and the

hotel expenses. Even to the doctor's fees and the nurse's wages, everything was liquidated. Of course it was neither consistent with Mary's sense of delicacy or good feeling to continue dependent upon the young Englishman any longer than her circumstances rendered necessary. But whither should she go? What should she do? Her eyes were naturally directed toward England, where her aunt, Miss Stanley, would, she knew full well, receive her with open arms, and where she was sure of experiencing a cordial welcome and sweet sympathy from her cousins Lady Sackville and the beautiful Louisa.

She accordingly took an early opportunity of making Theodore Varian acquainted with her intentions, which he, of course, could not possibly oppose. When she had done speaking, he gazed upon her pale but beautiful countenance with a look of tender interest and admiration, and then, taking her hand, he spoke in the following manner:

"Miss Owen, we are about to part, and you will forgive me if under the very peculiar circumstances of the case I address you in language which, in the afflicted state of your mind, only such circumstances as those to which I have alluded could possibly warrant. We must not regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few days. All that has happened has tended to level the formalities of months and years, and to make us friends. But there is a still more tender feeling than even friendship in my heart, and if your affections were previously disengaged, perhaps when you have leisure and inclination to reflect upon what I now say you will write to me from England and tell me candidly and frankly whether you think that by accepting me as your husband you will be contributing to your own happiness. I seek no answer now; very far am I from pressing you for one. Nothing, I repeat, but the peculiar circumstances under which we have met and under which we are about to part could justify me in even making this avowal of attachment, when all your griefs are fresh in your soul."

Theodore paused, and though Mary spoke not, but looked down with tearful eyes, yet the blush which rose to her cheeks, and the trembling of her hand which she suffered to remain in his own, gave him the gratifying assurance that his suit was not rejected.

"I am established in Geneva," he said, "as the manager

of a mercantile emporium connected with a great commercial firm in London. It was business relating to my affairs at Geneva which made me a passenger to Lausanne on board the ill-fated packet the other day. I shall return to Geneva immediately I have seen you safe on your journey away from Lausanne. My address at Geneva I shall beg leave to place in your hands, and pardon me, pardon me, if I say that the days and the weeks will be counted with some degree of anxiety and suspense until I receive a letter from you. You tell me that you are going to seek an asylum with kind relatives whom you have in England. I also have a very dear, dear relative in our native land, a sister, who has recently been married to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. They reside in London, and should unforeseen circumstances place you in a position to desire a home with an affectionate friend, my sister Ariadne will receive you with open arms, for my sake. You will allow me to give you a letter to Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon; it may be serviceable."

"Mr. Varian," answered Mary, now at length breaking silence, but speaking in a voice which showed how deeply she was moved by the kind language, the delicate manner, and at the same time the frank avowal of Theodore, "in the same way that peculiar circumstances have led you to address me in terms which are not only flattering but also deserve my sincerest gratitude, so must I be held exonerated from indiscretion if I respond with equal candour. You have saved my life; it is a life, then, that I owe you. But you have not only saved this life of mine, you have done all that a generous friend could do to make it tolerable in the first hours and days of my bitter anguish. I feel, oh, I feel the immensity of the obligation which I owe you; yes, and I feel also," she added, her voice sinking until it became scarcely audible with mingled confusion and deeply stirred emotion, "that it would give me happiness to be permitted to devote my life to the study of yours. Mr. Varian, I will write to you as soon as I reach England, and — and — Need I say more?"

"No, no, I ask you to say no more," exclaimed Varian, now delighted with the certainty that not merely his suit was accepted, but that he might even rely upon possessing the young maiden's love when time should have mellowed her grief sufficiently to allow room in her heart for the more

tender sentiment. Then quickly moderating, or, rather, controlling the enthusiasm of his joy, any prolongation of which would be, he delicately felt, unsuitable to Mary's position after the severe losses of sisters and mother which she had so recently sustained, he said, "But before we separate there is one circumstance of my life which in all honourable frankness I am bound to explain; and if after hearing my recital," he continued, in a voice that gradually grew desponding, "you should wish to recall anything that I may have construed into approval of my suit, do so, do so, although you would leave me wretched indeed."

Mary gazed upon him in surprise, but though she said nothing, her hand still lingered in his own, and therefore he went on. The reader has already divined what statement it was that Theodore Varian had to make. It was the narrative of those circumstances which had led to his temporary imprisonment in Newgate, his trial, his condemnation, his escape, and his pardon. But as he continued to speak, explaining how, for his sister Ariadne's sake, he had been guilty at the time of those little defalcations which had produced all his misfortunes, he saw the young damsel's eyes again filling with tears, but her looks beaming through with a deepening sympathy, and the cloud of apprehension was rapidly dissipated from his mind.

When he had brought his tale to a conclusion, Mary said, in a low, trembling voice, "Mr. Varian, Theodore, you need not wait for the first letter which I shall write to you from England for the assurance that in due time I will become your wife. No, I give you that promise now; and the life which you have saved shall be devoted to efface from your mind the memory of all your past misfortunes."

Theodore Varian raised to his lips the hand which trembled in his own, and this was the happiest moment of his life. Half an hour afterward the post-chaise which he had ordered for Mary's accommodation drove up to the door of the hotel, and as he presented her with a pocketbook containing her passport, he delicately intimated that she would likewise find therein the funds requisite for her journey back to England.

They then parted, and while the post-chaise rolled rapidly away in one direction, Theodore Varian proceeded in another conveyance and by another road back to Geneva.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE DELICATE COMMISSION

It was about half-past eight o'clock in the evening, and the prince regent was alone in one of the private apartments of Carlton House, awaiting with some little degree of anxiety the arrival of a person whom he was expecting. Presently his confidential valet Germain made his appearance, introducing a female enveloped in a handsome cloak and with a veil drawn over her features. The valet retired, and the prince regent motioned his visitress to be seated, an invitation which she accepted with some degree of awkward diffidence, as if she felt rather uncomfortable at being in the royal presence. But speedily recovering herself, for she was a woman of no small amount of assurance she lifted her veil, and revealed a countenance so matronly and honest in look that his Royal Highness could not help exclaiming, "Why, there must be some mistake. You surely are not —"

"Mrs. Gale, of Soho Square, at your Royal Highness's service," responded the woman, assuming her blandest tone.

"Then that is all right," said the prince, flinging himself indolently upon a sofa. "But you know, my worthy creature," he continued, "one is apt to fancy that the peculiar calling or avocation of persons gives a certain impress to their features, and that one may judge of them thereby. I am a pretty good physiognomist, and if any dozen people were marshalled before me, I think I could pick out the cunning lawyer, the astute barrister, the sanctimonious parson, the self-sufficient pedagogue, and so forth. As for the female tribe, I grant you that the task of discrimination is a trifle more difficult, because they are such adepts at throwing the veil of hypocrisy over all their proceedings, as well

as over their thoughts, passions, and feelings. It is no ill compliment to you, but, on the contrary, a very delicate piece of flattery, to declare that from your personal appearance no one could possibly detect the pleasant and agreeable courses of life which you follow, and in which, from all I have heard, you are so admirably proficient."

"I feel honoured by your Royal Highness's remarks," returned Mrs. Gale. "As a matter of course, it was to put my abilities to the test that your Royal Highness has sent for me hither?"

"Just so," rejoined the prince. "Help yourself to a glass of wine there, Mrs. Gale, and listen while I proceed to explain myself. The truth is, I am devoured by what the French call ennui, and that is to say, there are no pleasures which now seem to give me any gratification. Some of the finest and handsomest women in the land have at different periods contributed to my happiness, but the handsomest and the finest of them all is gone, to return no more, and she has left a void which I am anxious to fill up. Now, I am wearied of what may be termed the facility of success. There is such a sameness in always triumphing the moment the overture is made or the proposal is whispered in the ear of the coveted fair one. As a matter of course, if I cast my eyes around the circle of my female acquaintance, my thoughts can settle upon many who would throw themselves into my arms at the first encouraging look I might give, but these are really no conquests. There is nothing in such amours to pique the passion, nothing to afford the imagination scope for luxurious revelling. Desires that are gratified immediately they are formed are sated, as it were, even before the moment of enjoyment; and thus all these gallantries with fair ones who surrender themselves up the instant they receive the first glance of encouragement are devoid of excitement, and seem stale, flat, and utterly destitute of pleasing novelty. In plain terms, Mrs. Gale, I want a change."

"And in what manner can I assist your Royal Highness?" asked the woman, "for amongst the various ladies of my acquaintance I cannot at the moment fix my eyes upon any whose virtue is not of the easy character you yourself have described."

"I will explain myself more fully, Mrs. Gale," resumed the prince. "I have already said that I long for some

charming novelty. It is now for you to devote a few days to seek after something of this sort. Endeavour to find out some lovely, elegant, and virtuous girl who not merely requires wooing, but even some more serious trouble, to the achievement of the conquest. I want excitement, Mrs. Gale, and yet at the same time the adventure must be a safe one, in order that there may be no chance of exposure. Don't think of the daughter of tradespeople, for instance. I can't bear the manners of the shop, and, moreover, the parents of such a girl would prove so mercenary in hushing up the affair that their demands upon my purse would be incessant. For the same reason don't fix upon the daughter of poor gentlefolks; but in order that the novelty may be altogether exciting and piquant, let the object of our enterprise be some fair scion of the aristocracy. There, now, I have given you a difficult task to accomplish. I want you, in a word, to find out a virtuous young lady, of noble family and exquisite beauty, whose purity is beyond all doubt, whose reputation is unblemished as the falling snow, and who will therefore require an immense deal of trouble to overcome. Have I explained myself sufficiently, and will you undertake this enterprise? "

" I not only understand your Royal Highness, but I accept the commission," answered Mrs. Gale. " At the same time, the task is indeed a difficult one, and there is a special stipulation I must make."

"Name it," said the prince.

" That if need be," rejoined the vile woman, " I may associate with me in this proceeding a certain lady of quality, with whom I am well acquainted, and who stands sufficiently high for her real character to be above suspicion. I do not think that without the assistance of such a person I alone could carry out the enterprise successfully."

" Follow your own course," answered the prince, " but mind that the utmost secrecy is observed. And I tell you what, it will be more conducive to the excitement and interest of the whole proceeding if, when you have found out the fair one who is to be the heroine of this adventure, you do not immediately let her know who is in the background. Suppose, for instance, you entice the fair one to some convenient dwelling-place, if a little way in the country so much the better; then you can tell her that she is the object of adoration

on the part of an individual of rank and wealth, and you will see how she takes it."

"So that your Royal Highness's name is not to be mentioned in the first instance?" said Mrs. Gale.

"I see that you understand me well," observed the prince. "Here are a couple of hundred guineas as a retaining fee, and, depend upon it, my liberality will be measured in proportion to the pleasure you procure for me from this adventure which we have sketched out and in which I am already anxious to plunge with all the frenzy of a new excitement.

Mrs. Gale received the money with a smiling countenance, and took her leave of the prince. It was now ten o'clock, but she did not consider the hour too late to take the first step in the business which had been entrusted to her. She accordingly proceeded at once to North Audley Street, and called at the mansion of Lady Lechmere. This lady, whose name the reader will recollect in connection with the Countess of Curzon, was at home and disengaged. It was not her night for receiving company, nor was she elsewhere at any fashionable reunion of her friends. Mrs. Gale, who was supposed by the domestics to be some benevolent gentlewoman through whose agency Lady Lechmere occasionally dispensed her charities, was at once admitted into the room where the mistress of the mansion was seated at the time.

Lady Lechmere was, as we have stated in an earlier chapter, a widow, on the shady side of forty. She had been a beauty in her younger days, and though inveterately profligate, had nevertheless contrived to preserve her reputation; and she still indulged in secret gallantries, but in a very guarded manner and through the agency of Mrs. Gale. She therefore received the infamous woman with a familiar friendliness, and bidding her sit down, inquired the object of her visit at such an hour. Thereupon Mrs. Gale described everything that had just taken place between herself and the prince, and Lady Lechmere listened with deep attention to the narrative.

"But now," said her ladyship, when it was concluded, "in what manner do you expect me to help you? For you cannot suppose that I will run any risk in aiding you to become the pander to the royal pleasures. No reward that he

could give me would compensate for the loss of position which would inevitably follow exposure. Being rich, I do not want money, and having already rank and title, there is nothing of that sort that his Royal Highness can bestow upon me."

"But if there be no risk of exposure," said Mrs. Gale, "will not your ladyship embark in the enterprise, merely to oblige the prince? Consider, though possessed of ample means as you are, and highly placed in society, yet still the special favour of him who is already as good as the sovereign and will some day be king of England is not to be despised."

"Granted," said Lady Lechmere, "but still I am not disposed to run any great risk for the sake of obtaining such favour. You however said just now that there was no peril of this kind to be apprehended. I do not see how you can guard against it."

"What I meant was that, suppose we find out such a young creature as the prince desires, when once she has succumbed to his advances will not she herself either be too proud of her new position, or, on the other hand, too anxious to avoid the exposure of her shame to publish to all the world the wiles and treacherous manœuvres adopted to throw her into the arms of the prince?"

"Your argument certainly looks feasible enough," said Lady Lechmere, now evidently wavering, "and if I were assured that there could be no risk, I should not mind lending myself to the service of his Royal Highness."

"Now your ladyship speaks wisely," observed Mrs. Gale. Then, after a moment's pause, she added, as she surveyed Lady Lechmere with a flattering look, "And who knows what may be the result? You are still very handsome, and of the age, too, of many ladies who have won and enjoyed the royal favour. Ah! my dear madam, suppose the prince took a fancy to you?"

"He might, it is true," muttered Lady Lechmere to herself. "More improbable things in this world have happened. Well, I will think more of it. Call again in a few days —"

"My dear lady, there is no time to wait," interrupted Mrs. Gale. "Those who intend to serve a prince well must serve him quickly. At all events, you can no doubt give me immediate advice as to the first step to be taken in this enterprise, and in so doing you will not endanger yourself.

Then, as to whether you will afterward proceed any further in the business is a subject that can stand over for your mature deliberation."

"In what respect, Mrs. Gale, do you need my succour at the moment?"

"In pointing me out some fair creature amongst your acquaintances whom we may regard as the heroine of this grand drama about to be played."

"Let me see, what did you tell me?" said Lady Lechmere, in a musing tone. "A young lady of noble family, spotless purity, stainless reputation, exquisite beauty, and who is by no means likely to jump at the prince's overtures, but full of coyness and shyness, — in short, a citadel that is to be attacked and must be able to resist a siege ere its surrender. Is not this what you require?"

"Exactly so," returned Mrs. Gale.

"Then, let me tell you that it is by no means easy to place one's finger upon a being combining all these qualities. If beauty alone were required, the circle of my acquaintance would no doubt furnish a whole bevy of such fair candidates for the royal favour. But, bless you, they would each and all surrender at the very first overture made by the prince. Perhaps, though," added Lady Lechmere, "we might let one of these fair creatures into the secret and teach her to simulate coyness and shyness —"

"No, that will not do," hastily interrupted Mrs. Gale. "The prince is as deep as a well and as cunning as a fox, and not for a minute would he be deceived by the substitution of artificial prudery for natural modesty. Besides, as he himself assured me, he is an excellent judge of physiognomy, and I have no doubt he is so well experienced in the female character that at the very first glance he can tell whether the blush that arises on beauty's cheek springs from an innate sense of artless delicacy or from any less refined sentiment. In a word, Lady Lechmere, it must be a young lady of genuine qualities whom we are to introduce to the prince."

"Ah, I have it!" suddenly ejaculated Lady Lechmere. "I know where there is exactly the exquisite creature who will suit the present purpose. My acquaintance with her is very slight indeed. I have been but once to the mansion of the noble relatives with whom she resides, but from the little I saw upon that occasion of the young lady to whom

I allude, and from all I have heard of her, she is the very being to answer the description you have given. Indeed, I question whether the prince would ever triumph over her at all, unless by downright violence or treachery."

"And I do really think it was something of that sort which his Royal Highness had in view," cried Mrs. Gale, "although he of course would not speak out too plainly upon the point. But who is this phœnix of perfection that you are speaking of?"

"She is engaged to be married, and is altogether so beautiful, so amiable, so innocent a creature," said Lady Lechmere, musing aloud, "that I should have some compunction in being the instrument of doing her a wrong."

"Oh, my dear lady, this is being too punctilious," ejaculated Mrs. Gale. "Come, now, if you will succour me in the present enterprise, I will promise to introduce you to a young gentleman who is as handsome as Apollo, as discreet as a Minister of State, and who will be delighted to engage in a tender intrigue with your ladyship."

Mrs. Gale then proceeded to delineate the most exciting picture of a perfect Adonis of masculine beauty, so that she speedily worked up Lady Lechmere's passions to an almost frenzied degree. We must, however, observe that the wily woman was entirely drawing upon her own imagination for this handsome youth whom she was so generously promising as a paramour for the licentious demirep. But Lady Lechmere put implicit faith in all that the procuress was saying, and though of an age when she ought to have been able to control the fury of her passions, yet did her looks betray the ravenous frenzy of the desires blazing up within her.

"Come to me to-morrow morning, soon after breakfast," she said to Mrs. Gale, "and we will talk more upon the subject. I must think over it for at least this night. Besides, amongst the circle of my acquaintance it is quite possible that I may think of some other fair creature who will better answer your purposes, and whom I should have less remorse in delivering over to the arms of the prince. Come, then, to-morrow, I repeat, as early as you like, and we will decide upon what is to be done."

Mrs. Gale was well pleased with this arrangement, and took her departure, congratulating herself that the ground was already cleared for the campaign which she had to conduct.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE DARK HOUR

In one of the most beautiful parts of Buckinghamshire stood Hallingham Hall, the country-seat of Lord Florimel. It was situated in a vale, with a limpid river meandering through the spacious grounds, and the slopes of the surrounding eminences presented a beautiful variety of landscape scenes.

Lord and Lady Florimel, together with their beautiful niece, Florence Eaton, had been staying for about a fortnight at Hallingham Hall, and at the expiration of this period they were joined by Sir Valentine Malvern, who was to pass a short time there previous to the nuptial ceremony that would make the lovely Florence his bride.

The young lady was naturally rejoiced to meet her intended husband again, for even the fortnight's separation had appeared quite an age, while, on his part, Sir Valentine was well pleased to observe that the fresh air of the country had already conduced to the restoration of the colour to the cheeks of Florence. For latterly, ere removing to Hallingham Hall, she had grown pale and melancholy, her looks denoting that a deep despondency was taking possession of her mind. It had been thought the change of air would prove beneficial alike to her health and spirits, and this hope on the part of the fond relatives and anxious lover seemed already to be in the course of complete fulfilment.

"My dearest Florence," said Valentine Malvern, one evening, when, a few days after his arrival, he and his intended were rambling together on the bank of the river which wound its way amidst the fields, like a long coiling snake of pellucid glass, "my dearest Florence, you know not how rejoiced I am to see you recovering your health

and spirits. Ah! my dear girl, I have passed many an unhappy hour during the last two months on your account."

"I know that such has been the case, Valentine," she replied, gazing with mournful tenderness up into his countenance as she clung to his arm, "and I can assure you that it has increased my sorrow when I have seen you thus anxious concerning me. Believe me, I have struggled to the utmost of my power to conceal the despondency that was gradually weighing me down, but, oh, it was so difficult to assume gaiety when the heart was heavy as if sinking with a weariness of life."

"But tell me, dear Florence, give me the assurance from your own lips, that you are happier now?" and Malvern gazed upon her with the most ardent devotion, the most affectionate interest, and the most tender love depicted in every lineament of his handsome features.

"I feel happier now that you are with me," answered Florence; and then it seemed to her lover as if she struggled with a great effort to subdue the sigh which nevertheless rose to her lips.

"Yes, but was I not also with you when in London?" he asked, in a mildly mournful voice, "and then were you not yielding to that despondency which caused your fond relatives and myself such cruel anxiety on your account?"

"Valentine, dear Valentine," she answered, "let us change the conversation."

"Heavens, you are weeping, Florence, you are weeping!" he exclaimed, as the pearly drops trickling down her cheeks gleamed in the rays of the descending sun. "Oh, what means this grief, this sorrow?"

"Do not ask me, dear Valentine," she said, pressing the arm to which her delicate hand clung, and her voice was now nearly suffocated with sobs. "You know full well all that must be passing in my mind."

"Oh, that fatal day!" ejaculated Malvern, bitterly, "that fatal day when your aunt took you to St. James's Palace!"

"And yet," murmured Florence, "it was the day which made us acquainted."

"True, and therefore I bless that day for one thing," cried Malvern. "In that respect it is the brightest day in my whole existence. But for other reasons it is a day to be

regretted. Florence, dear Florence, you are still weeping. Oh, tranquillize yourself, compose your feelings, put away these sorrowful memories from your mind, do, sweet girl, I implore you, I conjure you, not merely for my sake, but also for your own," and catching her in his arms, he strained the beauteous creature to his breast.

" Valentine," she murmured, as they resumed their walk together along the bank of the river, " you know that I love you with an affection as fond, as devoted, and as sincere as ever female heart could cherish, but not even the strength of all this love of mine can pour into my soul a flood of happiness potent enough to sweep away those desponding thoughts which, despite of myself, overshadow me at times and make me feel as if some evil were impending. Alas, Valentine, it was the hand of Heaven itself which so combined a variety of circumstances as to lead me on to the knowledge of the mystery of my birth, that mystery which my kind relatives had so long and so sedulously endeavoured to keep shrouded from my view. And oh, when I think of my poor mother's wrongs, — for wrongs she must have suffered, wrongs she must have endured, though I am but so partially acquainted with the tale as not to understand it all thoroughly, — yet, when I think of that poor dead mother's wrongs, it is enough to drive me mad," and the young maiden, stopping suddenly short and disengaging herself from her lover's arm, covered her face with her hands, and he beheld the tears trickling between her gloved fingers.

" Oh, Florence, dearest, dearest Florence, yield not thus to the influence of these bitter thoughts," exclaimed Valentine, himself almost frenzied with grief. " It is all my fault. It was I who made you a rash promise to help in solving the mystery which bewildered and afflicted you. It was I who went to the palace and sought an interview with the prince — "

" The prince, my father! " said Florence, suddenly interrupting him, and as she removed her hands at the same time from her countenance, he saw that it was deadly pale, and wore the expression of an anguish which, even had he not loved her so tenderly as he did, would still have been painful enough for him to behold on the countenance of one so beautiful, so young, so innocent.

" Florence, why speak you thus? Why look you thus? "

he asked, gazing on her with a sort of terror as well as grief. "There is a depth in your tone and there is an agonizing impress on your features which I cannot endure."

"Listen to me, dear Valentine," she said, again taking his arm and gently resuming her walk by his side on the bank of the river. "I feel that I must now give utterance to those thoughts which sit so heavy upon my soul. And if not to you, to whom else on earth should I breathe them? Listen, I say, and do not interrupt me. Though so little has been told me relative to the mystery of my birth, and that little so guardedly and so delicately imparted by my beloved relatives, yet can my imagination fill up all the gloomy shades and terrible voids of the picture. Alas, Valentine! that my mother, my dear, perished mother must have been pure and virtuous and innocent and good, I am confident, for is not my aunt Pauline so, and were they not sisters? Alas! then, she must have been deceived, she must have been betrayed; and who was the deceiver, who was the betrayer? He who holds upon my heart the claim of a father, he whom nature prompts me to love with a filial affection, but whom I cannot love — no, no, I cannot even think of him with respect, feeling confident, as I do, that he betrayed and deceived my too trusting, too loving mother.

"For a time, until I knew in what light the prince stood with regard to me, I experienced a yearning toward him; from the moment of that interview at St. James's Palace my sympathy was enlisted in his behalf, in a manner that often stirred my thoughts with an indescribable pathos and made me weep. But still all that was a feeling so very different from the one which I experience for you. Then, when the mystery of that yearning was cleared up, and I discovered that it was nature's voice appealing from the depths of my soul toward the author of my being, oh, what would I not have given to be enabled to love, revere, and venerate him as a daughter should love, revere, and venerate a father? But no, no, this happiness was not to be allowed me, for at the same time that I learned in what light he stood toward me did I become aware of my poor mother's unhappy love. Ah! her early death, a death no doubt caused by a broken heart, tells but too plainly the terrible tale of ruined hopes, blighted affections. And now you understand, Valentine, how hard it is, nay, more, how shocking it is, to be

compelled to think of my own father as the cause of my poor mother's premature death. There have been times when, gazing up at the canvas on which the countenance of that dear mother is preserved, I have felt my heart throb almost to bursting, and I have been so choked with a convulsing anguish that it has seemed as if the hand of death were upon me, and that I was about to join my perished parent in the grave."

Florence ceased, not because she had given utterance to all she had to say, but because her voice was now lost in a fresh outburst of anguish. Again did her lover snatch her to his breast, imprint upon her cheeks, her lips, and her brow the fondest caresses, and say everything he could to soothe, solace, and cheer her. By her looks he saw that she was deeply sensible of the sincerity of his love and the tenderness of his sympathy, but the dark hour was upon her, and she was a prey to a grief which admitted not of speedy consolation.

"Valentine," she continued, in a voice plaintively low and mournfully sweet, "I cannot help this tide of reflections rushing in upon my brain with an almost overwhelming effect. You will pardon me, you will forgive me, if I thus distress you, but these thoughts which fill me with grief are stronger than myself. For the first fortnight that I was at Hallingham I experienced a kind of relief in being afar from the same city which contains him whom I am bound in the secrecy of my heart to regard as my father, but whom, alas! I cannot love nor revere as such. Within the last two or three days, however, the gloominess of my thoughts has been slowly and steadily coming back. I have struggled against that growing despondency, I have battled with it as courageously, as resolutely, and as arduously as I could; yes, battled with it more for your sake than my own, because I would not afflict you. But this evening the cloud has settled again upon my soul with a weight and with a darkness which I could neither conceal nor shake off. Alas, alas! Valentine," she added, suddenly bursting forth into a passionate flood of weeping, "I am afraid that you will not consult your own happiness by espousing me."

"Heavens, Florence, speak not thus!" wildly exclaimed Malvern. "There is something dreadful in your words."

"Oh, do they sound like prophecy?" she asked, in a

frenzied manner. " Yes, yes, they do, for they are dictated by a presentiment."

" Florence, you distress me more than language can describe," said Malvern, a deep solemnity suddenly filling his looks, his voice, and his manner. " During the fortnight I was separated from you, being compelled to remain in London, as you are aware, to transact particular business in respect to my late father's affairs, my soul was gladdened by the cheering accounts which I received concerning you from Lord Florimel. I came down hither a few days ago, joyful in the thought that I should behold you restored to health and spirits. And this hope seemed to be confirmed. Several days have passed, I have watched you, oh, you know not with how intense and absorbing an interest, and each night, on retiring to my chamber, have I knelt down to return thanks to Heaven for this change which I believed to have been consummated in the condition of your health and the tone of your mind. This evening, when we came forth for our usual walk, I felt my heart so exultant, my joy so full of a soaring gratitude toward Heaven, that I could no longer prevent my lips from giving utterance to the words of congratulation toward yourself. Alas, alas! " continued Valentine, in deep despondency, " I now find that the cloud has returned to your soul, and that your thoughts are full of gloominess and pain. But believe me, Florence," he added, in a fervid manner, " that all the endeavours of my life shall be directed to the healing of this wounded soul of thine, my every study shall be to win you away from grief and foreboding, and to conjure up the smiles again to your sweet, angelic countenance."

" Your kindness touches me to the quick," faltered the pale but beauteous girl, " but, alas! I fear so deeply lest this morbid state of mind on my part, for such I know and feel it is, should cause you incessant affliction, whereas the object of marriage should be the promotion of the happiness of both."

" Florence, dear Florence, I beseech you not to talk thus," said Malvern, gently encircling her slender waist with his arm. " You are dearer to me than aught that the world possesses, and so must you ever remain. When I gaze on you and behold the looks of innocence beaming upon the lineaments of beauty, when I contemplate you as a being of an

etherealized order, it cuts me to the very soul to think that sorrow should have been able to fasten its vulture-talons upon such a heart as yours. But, oh, my beloved Florence, my angel, my darling, God is just, God is merciful, and there is not a bane in this world without its antidote, there is not a wound that can be inflicted for which no anodyne can be found. And you, my adored one, when surrounded by all the tender ministrations of the most enthusiastic love, when enshrined as the idol of my worship and my devotion, you, I say, sweet Florence, shall find that in such a love as this there is a soothing power even for the griefs that may have eaten most deeply into your soul."

Of her own accord the gentle maiden threw her arms around her lover's neck, and kissed him unasked. Then, as she thus clung to him, she drew back her head somewhat and gazed up into his countenance with a look of such fond, such ineffable affection, that it seemed as if the spirit of ethereal love itself were shining through her. At that moment, too, the last beams of the sinking sun shone upon her features, and as the reviving bliss of her heart sent up the roseate hue again to her cheeks, her countenance appeared radiant as that of an angel with the sunlight playing on it. The effect was heightened by the tear-drops which still stood upon her long lashes, and which glittered like diamonds, while the sweet, azure orbs themselves reflected the dancing light, and the rich tresses of her golden hair seemed to catch a burnished lustre from the same source, thus adding to the glory of her aspect.

"Oh, beauteous, beauteous Florence, thou art an angel and not a creature of this earth," cried the enraptured Malvern, as he strained her with impassioned vehemence to his breast.

His ear caught not the sigh which came up from the depths of the young maiden's soul as the presentiment struck her that, though she was indeed as yet a being of this world, yet it was written in the book of destiny that she should soon be an angel in heaven.

The lovers now resumed their walk along the bank of the river, and if Florence were not happier in her mind, at all events her despondency was less apparent than a few minutes back, for the excitement of the heart's feelings, aroused by those tender proofs of love on Valentine's part,

had recalled the colour to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes. But, ah, what means that loud cry which, suddenly ringing through the air, reaches their ears? They stop short, and Florence clings to Sir Valentine Malvern's arm, as if to prevent herself from sinking down beneath the weight of a vague but terrible presentiment which falls upon her.

Almost at the same instant a man is seen rushing toward them along the bank, having apparently emerged from a copse, or grove, which stretched down to the margin of the stream at a little distance.

"Help, for God's sake, help!" cried this individual, who seemed to be a labouring man. "Lord Florimel is drowning! Help, help!"

At those terrible words a wild shriek burst from the lips of Florence Eaton, and her senses immediately abandoning her, she would have fallen had not Valentine's arm sustained her.

"Help, help! quick, quick!" cried the individual who had given the alarm. "Come, or it will be too late."

Not another instant did Valentine hesitate how to act, but depositing the inanimate form of Florence upon the grass, which a sultry day had left perfectly free from dampness, he bounded in the track of the strange man, who guided him fleetly toward the copse just alluded to. But scarcely had the young baronet entered the grove when he was seized upon by three other men, wearing black masks over their countenances, and being altogether unprepared for such an attack, he was overpowered in an instant. Indeed, quick as thought strong cords were fastened to his hands and feet; he was then bound to a tree, and the three men, accompanied by the individual who had enticed him thither, rushed away in the direction where he had left Florence.

Notwithstanding the suddenness with which this outrage was accomplished, Valentine had demanded of the men what their object was, whom he had offended, and why he was thus treated? For he was at once convinced that they were not robbers, inasmuch as they exhibited no unnecessary violence in thus securing him, nor did they offer to plunder his person. But he could obtain no answer to the questions thus put, and the work being done effectually, though hurriedly, the men sped away, as already stated, leaving the

young baronet bound fast to the tree in the deep shade of the grove.

Desperate was the struggle he made to release himself, for the cruelest apprehensions now seized upon his mind in respect to Florence. But his efforts to escape from the bonds which secured him were altogether unavailing. Then he suddenly relinquished the attempt, and strained his eyes to penetrate through the shade of the grove and the deepening gloom of evening, so as to follow the men with his looks and watch their proceedings. But no, he could not, from the spot where he was thus bound, command a view of that place where he had left Florence lying upon the grass, and, well-nigh driven to frenzy, he shouted for help as loudly as he could. The echoes answered him, but no other voice responded. The darkness deepened, the passing minutes grew into an hour, and still was the unhappy young gentleman held fast in the captivity of his bonds. Again and again did he struggle with desperation to extricate himself; but no, the cords were stout, they had been tied with skilful hands, though the work was done rapidly, and it was a tree strong as a marble column to which the lover of Florence Eaton was thus held fast. Two, three, four hours passed, and, under the influence of terrible apprehensions, agonizing feelings, cruel uncertainties, and wildering conjectures, combined with the exhaustion produced by incessant but vainly renewed attempts to free himself from his bonds, Sir Valentine Malvern felt his physical and mental energies alike giving way.

Presently, some time past midnight, just as he was sinking down into that kind of languor which seemed to be the precursor of approaching death, he heard voices at a distance, and beheld the gleam of lights moving about to and fro along the bank of the river. Collecting all his energies, he cried out for help again, but his voice was so feeble that it was some time ere he could make himself heard. At length he succeeded, and then the lights all began advancing rapidly toward the grove, so that in a few moments he could perceive that they were torches which several men were carrying in their hands. Almost immediately afterward, Lord Florimel, attended by all the male domestics of his mansion, for these were the bearers of the torches, entered the grove, and their amazement may be better conceived than de-

scribed when they discovered Sir Valentine Malvern in that condition.

In the hurried manner of acute suspense he inquired concerning Florence, and then all his uncertainty was cleared up, all his terrible misgiving was confirmed, on hearing from Lord Florimel's lips that the young lady had not been seen since she went forth to walk before sunset with Sir Valentine. Indeed, it appeared that the prolonged and unaccountable absence of the two lovers had naturally filled the inmates of the hall with alarm; and as the hours passed away and they returned not, Lord Florimel had come forth, with all his male dependents, to examine the banks of the river, and ascertain if any traces of accident or misadventure might afford a clue to the mystery of this absence.

Being speedily emancipated from his bonds, and his strength somewhat recruited by a draught of brandy, which one of the men (a game-keeper) happened to have in a flask about his person, Sir Valentine related all that had occurred, and there could consequently be no longer any doubt as to the fact that some diabolical treachery had been played. In a word, it was clear enough that Florence had been carried off. The false alarm which had represented Lord Florimel to be drowning, was, of course, a heartless stratagem to separate Sir Valentine from Florence, and the reader has seen how well the trick succeeded.

But who could be the perpetrator of the outrage? This seemed to defy all conjecture. There was, however, no time to indulge in speculations and hypotheses upon the point, but Lord Florimel ordered his dependents to separate in all directions, and make inquiries amongst the peasants and country-people as to whether strangers had been seen, or a post-chaise or other vehicle observed, under any circumstances that might afford a clue to the solution of the mystery. In short, everything was done which could be possibly thought of at the time to get upon the track of the authors of this most unaccountable outrage.

CHAPTER XL

THE ABDUCTION

We left Florence Eaton lying in a state of unconsciousness upon the bank of the river. When she came to herself again, she was inside a vehicle along with two females. The carriage was tearing along at a tremendous rate, and in the dim, uncertain light which now prevailed the amazed and affrighted girl could distinguish no familiar features by the roadside so as to make her aware of the route which the equipage was pursuing, and it was only with indistinctness that she could perceive the countenances of the two females in whose company she thus found herself.

At first it struck her that she must be in a dream, and, closing her eyes, she pressed her hand to her brow to concentrate her reflections. But as all that had taken place on the bank of the river came rapidly back to her mind, and she remembered the alarming occurrence which had made her swoon in her lover's arms, she gave vent to a sudden cry of anguish, and forcibly catching the sleeve of the female who was seated next to her, she exclaimed, in a quick, hysterical tone, "My uncle — Lord Florimel — what has happened? Speak, speak!"

"Your uncle, my dear child," answered the female to whom she had addressed herself, and who by her voice, manner, and deportment Florence soon perceived to be a high-bred person — "your uncle, my dear child, is safe."

"Heaven be thanked!" cried Florence, a tremendous weight suddenly taken from her mind. "But whither am I going? Who are you? What means this rapid travelling? Oh, keep me not in suspense. Something terrible must have occurred, for all this can scarcely mean harm to myself."

"Fear nothing, and give way to no apprehensions,"

replied the lady who was seated next to Florence. "Everything that is being done is for your ultimate good. You are too much excited now for me to enter into any particulars, besides which, it is impossible to converse calmly and tranquilly while travelling at this rapid rate. In about an hour we shall be at our journey's end, and you may rely, Miss Eaton, upon the kindest treatment and the most delicate attentions."

"But who are you?" inquired Florence, both frightened and bewildered. "Surely if you are friendly disposed toward me you will not hesitate, even for a single instant, to say wherefore I am in your company? In short, what is the meaning of all this proceeding, so incomprehensible to me?"

"Know me as Mrs. Waldegrave," said the lady, "and this person," she added, in allusion to the other female who was seated opposite, "is my housekeeper, Mrs. Spencer. She is a kind-hearted and excellent woman, and will pay you all possible attention."

"You are both strange to me; I never even heard of you before," cried Florence, her misgivings increasing to the most poignant degree of anguish. "Why are you taking me away? Is it with the consent of my uncle and aunt? Where is Sir Valentine Malvern? Oh, speak, I conjure you. Keep me not in suspense. Has any harm befallen him?"

"No, nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Waldegrave. "You have nought, my dear child, to make you unhappy, much less fill you with alarm."

"Then, in one word," said Florence, all her courage and all her presence of mind appearing to concentrate themselves for a great effort in the present emergency of suspicion and doubt, "in one word, tell me what means this proceeding, or I will shriek forth from the carriage window for help."

"Miss Eaton, I cannot and will not explain myself at present," answered the lady who called herself Mrs. Waldegrave, and she spoke in a firm, decisive, and almost peremptory voice. "As for your threat of crying for help from the window, it were useless. The carriage is mine, the servants are mine, and you may rest assured that whatever their instructions are, they will obey them."

Florence Eaton said not another word, but sank back into the corner of the vehicle with a terrible sensation of wretched-

ness in her bosom. That she was the victim of some treachery was but too evident, but of what nature could this treachery be? Her soul was too guileless, her thoughts too pure, her acquaintance with the ways of the world too limited to enable her to form the natural conjecture which a female of larger experience would at once have done, namely, that it was for the most dishonourable of purposes she had thus been made the victim of a forcible abduction. Three or four times during the hour which elapsed after she had regained her consciousness did she beseech Mrs. Waldegrave to relieve her mind from suspense, but perceiving that it was in vain to question this lady, the unhappy girl gave way to her grief in floods of tears and bitter lamentations.

Presently the carriage stopped, while a servant got down from the box to open a gate leading into a large park, and then the equipage, turning into this enclosure, pursued its way up a wide gravel road to a spacious and handsome-looking mansion, at the principal entrance of which it stopped. The front door immediately opened, a couple of servants in rich liveries came forth, and Mrs. Waldegrave hastily whispered in Florence Eaton's ear, " For your own sake, make no appeal to my domestics, for they cannot, they dare not, disobey my orders, whatever those orders may be, and you would only expose yourself to a mortifying humiliation by appealing to them."

Florence Eaton felt so truly miserable that she had now neither spirits nor courage for anything, but descending mechanically from the carriage, she suffered herself to be conducted by Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer into the mansion. Lights were burning in the hall, which was spacious and lofty, with marble columns and splendid statues. Thence they ascended a wide and equally magnificent staircase, but Florence observed little of the specimens of sculpture or the porcelain vases which embellished the ascent. She was led on into a sumptuously furnished sitting-room, where a table was spread with refreshments, and Mrs. Waldegrave now pressed her to sit down and partake of the repast. The invitation seemed, all in a moment, to make the young lady sensible of the circumstances of her position; that is to say, she suddenly woke up from the confusion of her ideas, and, flinging a quick glance around, exclaimed, " This is no place with which I am familiar. Everything is

strange, as the countenances which meet my eyes. Tell me, then, once for all, where am I, and who are you? "

" My name I have already told you," said Mrs. Waldegrave. " I may now add that this is my house, where you will be a most welcome guest."

" Or a prisoner, a captive! " cried Florence, bitterly. Then, arming herself with all a young virgin's dignity, she said, " But no, it is scarcely possible that you can really mean outrage against me. You are yourself evidently a lady of wealth and position and respectability, and you can have no object in doing me harm. You also," added Florence, turning toward Mrs. Spencer, " are of an appearance far from calculated to inspire terror or foreboding. There is even something kind and benevolent in your looks. Then why am I here? "

As she asked herself this question, — for it was put in a musing manner to herself, though spoken aloud, — a pallor of a ghastly aspect suddenly overspread her countenance, and she staggered back, as if the idea which suddenly entered her head had struck her with the violence of a blow. Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer sprang forward to catch her in their arms, for they thought she was on the point of falling backward, but with an abrupt start and a wild cry, she shrieked forth, " No, no, keep off, do not come near me. You wish to put the strait-waistcoat on me, you think me mad. O heavens! you think me mad! " repeated the wretched girl, and, flinging herself upon a sofa, she burst into a flood of tears, wringing her hands bitterly.

Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer exchanged quick looks of amazement, as they all in a moment comprehended the nature of the idea which had thus suddenly taken possession of Florence Eaton.

" Oh, yes, yes, now I understand it all," again shrieked forth the poor girl, in the wildest paroxysms of anguish. " I have read in books how people are thus spirited away by strangers, and at night-time, thrust into carriages, and borne off to madhouses. But I am not mad. No, no, believe me, dear lady," she continued, throwing herself upon her knees at the feet of Mrs. Waldegrave, " I am not mad. Good heavens! is it possible that my uncle and my aunt, who have cherished me so tenderly, or that Valentine, who loves me so fondly, could have consigned me to the horrors

of a madhouse? Is it true that I have had strange thoughts and perhaps said strange things at times, but still I am not mad, no, not mad."

"Rise, rise, dear child," said Mrs. Waldegrave, in a soothing and conciliatory manner. "Take my advice, retire to rest, endeavour to sleep soundly, and to-morrow we will have some serious conversation together. Do not for a moment fancy that any harm will befall you."

"Well, I must trust in your kindness, then," said poor Florence, in a tone so deeply mournful and with a look so full of utter despair that any but the flintiest heart would have been moved by that spectacle of woe on the part of one so youthful, so innocent, so lovely.

She rose from her knees, slowly and painfully, and with a fixed look, in which there was nothing wild, but all blank hopelessness, while Mrs. Spencer intimated her readiness to conduct the young lady to a bedchamber. Florence followed her mechanically, and was escorted up-stairs to a room furnished in the most elegant manner. Mrs. Spencer asked if Miss Eaton would prefer sleeping alone, or whether she would like to have a lady's-maid as her companion. In reply to which Florence uttered the single word, "Alone," and then Mrs. Spencer, bidding her good night, issued from the chamber.

The young damsel sat herself down near the elegant toilet-table, but instead of making any preparations for retiring to rest, she fell into a deep reverie. As the reader has already seen, she fancied she had discovered the clue to all these proceedings which had at first filled her with so much uncertainty and alarm, and she began to revolve in her mind all that she had ever said or done within the last few months that could possibly have led her relations to imagine that her mind was unhinged. Poor girl! she soon began attaching importance to many, many comparatively trivial words and actions on her part, and as she pondered upon those intervals when the dark cloud had rested upon her soul, she could not help saying to herself, "Alas! perhaps it is indeed too true, and when I thought of my poor dead mother's wrongs, I might have looked and said such strange things that those about me fancied me mad."

She put her hand to her brow, and pressed it hard to her throbbing temples. Then, resting her elbow upon the toilet-

table, she sat perfectly motionless for several minutes, asking herself whether, in truth, her mind was unsettled, or whether she was the victim of a fearful misconception on the part of her relatives. Alas! this morbid state of feeling on her part was but too well calculated to unsettle her mind in reality, and make reason totter upon its throne.

All of a sudden she burst into a violent fit of weeping, and wringing her hands bitterly, exclaimed aloud, "Oh, Valentine, Valentine, you also thought me mad, and you must likewise have given your assent to my being brought hither."

At length, exhausted with the wearing and tearing excitement of her feelings, she laid aside her apparel, retired to rest, and speedily sank into a profound slumber.

When she awoke in the morning and reflected on all that had taken place on the previous night, she was more than ever convinced that the whole proceeding was dictated by the motives her imagination had suggested. She feared not ill-treatment in her present habitation, nor at the hands of those by whom she was surrounded, but she longed, oh, she deeply longed to go back to her relations whom she loved so well, and again to behold him who possessed the tenderest affections of her heart. But how was this happy consummation to be brought about? It naturally occurred to her that she could only be restored to her home and to her friends when her mind should no longer exhibit any of those morbid feelings which (as she fondly fancied) had led to her present position. She therefore resolved to exercise a rigid and stern control not only over all her words, but over all her thoughts, to study alike the discipline of her mind and the forms of her language, in a word, to do her best to convince those about her, in as short a time as possible, that she was thoroughly cured. Thus did the poor girl reason herself into the belief that her brain was actually touched by insanity, and that it was necessary for her to exert all her moral energies with a view to the reëstablishment of her complete mental health.

Having been led by the very artlessness of her nature to these conclusions, — for she was too guileless to suspect for a single instant that it was from dishonourable motives she had been snatched away from home and placed where she was, — she did not, of course, entertain the

slightest resentment against her uncle and aunt, nor against Valentine Malvern, for having (as she supposed) consigned her to a madhouse. She believed that they had only done what was absolutely necessary, and with the kindest intention toward herself. She even, therefore, more lovingly and tenderly than ever cherished their images, and, if possible, more devoutly prayed that Heaven would shower down the choicest blessings upon their heads.

Presently a neatly dressed young female, of interesting appearance, entered the chamber, announcing herself as the lady's-maid specially appointed to wait upon Miss Eaton. Florence received her with that amiable kindness which she was ever wont to display toward her inferiors, and the maid could not help thinking to herself that the young lady already seemed wonderfully resigned to all that had happened to her. By the time the process of the toilet was finished, Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance, and embracing Florence, she expressed her delight to find her so tranquillized in feeling and so comparatively well in looks. Florence gave a smiling answer, and even expressed herself grateful for the attentions with which she found herself surrounded. Mrs. Waldegrave then led her down to the breakfast-parlour, and though the young damsel ate but little, she nevertheless seemed in tolerably good spirits, and treated Mrs. Waldegrave with a sort of affectionate respect.

We must here pause to give some brief description of the mansion at which the present scenes are occurring. It was one of those old-fashioned country-seats which are principally to be met with in the agricultural districts, and which at the time of their erection were intended in all respects to suit the purposes and the conveniences of those country squires who farmed their own estates and lived from one year's end to another amongst their tenants without dreaming of " London seasons " or visits to fashionable watering-places. The mansion of which we are speaking was one of the kind alluded to. It was spacious, and possessed numerous outhouses, so that while in front it had all the appearance of a handsome country-house, in the rear it looked like an immense farm-homestead. The hall, the staircase, and some of the sitting-apartments had been completely modernized, by the aid of marble pillars, sculptured cornices, beautiful statues, carpets upon the oaken floors, and such

other arrangements as suited the fashionable tastes of the recent and present possessor of the mansion.

It was chiefly in the upper portion of the spacious building that its antiquated architecture and arrangements had been left untouched by the innovation of modern decorators, builders, carpenters, and upholsterers. The highest story consisted of a long passage, reaching from one end of the building to the other, and having on each side an array of doors numbered like those of an inn. Overhead, and just beneath the roof, was an immense loft, stretching likewise from one extremity of the building to the other, and this place in former times had served as a storeroom for the purposes of the thrifty housewife. But the shelves, racks, and frames where autumn fruits in those past times were wont to be kept, and where all kinds of garden-stuff, sweet herbs, and so forth, had been spread out with a careful hand for winter's use, were all empty now, and the immense loft no longer served for any purpose. However, the clumsy wooden crane, which in former times had been used to hoist up huge hampers of fruit, baskets of vegetables, sacks of potatoes, and all the products of the kitchen-garden that were wont to be stored, as above stated, in the immense loft, that huge crane, we say, was still there, but the door from which it had to be thrust forth when its services were required, and which, as the reader may understand, opened, as it were, upon an abyss, had remained shut up many long, long years.

Having thus glanced at the appearance of the mansion where the present scenes are passing, we shall now resume the thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XLI

THE FAIR CAPTIVE

A WEEK had passed since the forcible abduction of Florence Eaton, and during this interval the morbid condition of the young damsel's mind had experienced the pernicious influences of her captivity, as well as of the belief which she had formed in respect to its motive. When alone, she often and often carried her thoughts back to those days when she was blithe and happy, when nothing weighed upon her soul, and she knew not the name of care. This train of reflection naturally led her to date the altered state of her feelings from that fatal hour when she first beheld the prince regent at St. James's Palace, and she could not help, often and often, saying to herself, " Had I never known the prince, my father, I should be gay and happy now, as previously I was wont to be."

The result of these meditations was a strengthening of that feeling of pain and anguish which, ever since the discovery of her parentage, she had experienced when thinking of her father. We have heard her in sorrow and in grief make her unsophisticated plaint to Valentine Malvern, to the effect that she could not love, revere, and venerate the name of her father as a daughter should; but now, during this week of her captivity, she had been insensibly but irresistibly led on to regard that father's image not merely with pain, but with absolute aversion. She struggled against this sentiment so repugnant to her delicate appreciations of gentleness, kindness, and propriety, but it gained upon her, it grew stronger than herself, and she could not throw off its influence. Let us follow her for a little space, when thus carried on by the strong current of her reflections, and the reader will gain therefrom a deeper insight into the

mysterious changes that were operating in the soul of Florence Eaton.

"Can I any longer conceal from myself that the spell of an evil destiny is upon me? Why was I suffered, after the lapse of so many years, to penetrate the veil of mystery which had been so religiously kept hanging over my birth? My childhood had passed in blissful ignorance of everything calculated to draw down a cloud upon my soul; my girlhood had passed likewise in the same happy unconsciousness of all that lurked behind the veil; but when entering upon womanhood, the force of destiny suddenly manifested itself, and, as it was decreed that my eyes should be opened so as to scan the past, Heaven in its own inscrutable manner combined all the incidents that were to lead to this initiation. Thus the day which first brought me into the presence of my father likewise threw me in the way of Valentine, through whom it was decreed that the reading of the mystery was to be brought about. For had I not so earnestly besought him to clear it up for me, never would the secret have fallen from the lips of my uncle and my aunt.

"And then, what did I discover? That the prince, who at first had enlisted my sympathies, had been the cause, long years ago, of my poor mother's unhappiness and shame and premature death. And I have sought to love this father, but I cannot. No, if I endeavour to look lovingly on his image, that of my poor mother rises up before me in mournfulness, in sorrow, even with reproachful looks, and seems to remind me that I am endeavouring to love her murderer. O heavens! what thought is this which has sent a shudder through my entire being? That my father is a murderer, the murderer of my mother! Alas! when I conjure up that sweet and beauteous countenance whose lineaments are preserved upon the faithful canvas at my uncle's mansion in London, it seems that I must fall down and kneel to that image as if it were an angel's; and then, at the same moment, an obtruding shadow darkens my soul, and this shadow is the image of my father. Oh, Heaven send that I may never behold the prince again! For I feel, oh, I feel that I could not endure to gaze upon him, I could not approach him without feeling a cold tremor pass over me. I should fly from him, my God! I should fly from him, as if it were a spectre haunting me. His very image fills me with a pre-

sentiment of evil. Methinks that my fatal curiosity in seeking to penetrate the mystery of the past has already begun to draw down a terrible punishment upon my head, and that in the consummation of my unhappy destiny my own father is yet to bear a part."

But we will not follow the afflicted girl in those reflections to which she constantly found herself yielding, and from which she struggled to escape. Suffice it to say that the condition of her mind day by day grew more morbid, until she at length not merely contemplated the image of her father with pain and aversion, but even with a mortal terror. She would dream that the prince, in the shape of a hideous spectre, stood by her couch at night, and made threatening gestures with his outstretched arms above her head. Even in the middle of the day, in the broad sunlight, did she behold that image rising up before her, like a dark shade obstructing the beams which the glorious effulgence of noon was pouring in at the windows; and then she would pass her hand rapidly over her eyes, so that the phantom of her imagination would disappear ere the scream that rose to her lips found vent. Horror was thus taking possession of the mind of poor Florence Eaton.

But did not Mrs. Waldegrave perceive all this? No; for in pursuance of the resolve which the young damsel had made on the first morning of her captivity at the mansion, a resolve dictated by her earnest longing to be freed from a place which she fancied to be a madhouse, she maintained an aspect of outward calm, blended even with a certain degree of cheerfulness, that completely veiled the morbid condition of her mind. Heaven knows it was not with any sentiment of low cunning or any feeling of base duplicity that Florence practised this concealment. No, she was incapable of artifice, as the term is generally understood. Poor girl, she fancied that she had been placed there for the sake of her mental health, and that the more control she exercised over her inward feelings the sooner she would be restored to her friends, so that it was natural enough for her to imagine that by forcing herself to seem cheerful and gay she was putting a wholesome restraint upon the morbid action of her thoughts and was ministering to her own cure.

It was the eighth morning after the young lady's forcible

abduction that Mrs. Waldegrave, when breakfast was over, addressed the fair captive in the following manner:

"On the night of your arrival I intimated to you, my dear Miss Eaton, that on the ensuing day we would have some conversation together, but I have purposely postponed all such serious discourse until now, in order that you might have leisure to become completely reconciled to your present abode, and also that you might learn to know me better than the acquaintanceship of a few short hours could possibly have enabled you to do. Now, if you please, we will have this promised but deferred conversation."

"You may easily suppose, Mrs. Waldegrave," said Florence, endeavouring to still the beatings of that heart which was palpitating with suspense, "that I am deeply interested in the observations you have just made, and that I am glad you are about to converse with me upon any topic regarding my welfare, for to such do I conceive you have alluded."

"Listen, then, with attention and patience," said Mrs. Waldegrave, and, drawing her chair closer to where Florence was seated, she continued thus: "Young ladies of your age, innocence, and inexperience often imagine that they themselves are the best judges of their own happiness, and they fondly believe that, in order to ensure this happiness, they have only to follow the impulse of a particular sentiment, or yield to the influence of a feeling the greatest charm of which is its novelty. But real happiness, such as the world understands it, is not to be obtained in this manner. Fond relations, more indulgent than wise, will sometimes encourage young ladies to pursue the bent of their inclinations in the course to which I am alluding, and perhaps they do not err, so long as no prospects of a more brilliant character present themselves to the view. But sometimes when these brilliant prospects do present themselves, they are viewed with mistrust and suspicion, because the prejudices of an extreme refinement of morality are against them; yet, when regarded in a purely worldly point of view, the proceeding which they suggest should be looked upon as paramount above all other considerations. I do not know whether you catch my meaning?" observed Mrs. Waldegrave, as she noticed that Florence gazed upon her with a look of deepening perplexity and bewilderment.

" Frankly speaking," replied the young lady, " I cannot at all comprehend the nature of your remarks. If I were to read them in a book, I should consider them as forming a portion of some deep metaphysical essay altogether exceeding the limited range of my intellect."

" I will, then, become more explicit," said Mrs. Waldegrave, " and instead of speaking of young ladies generally, I will allude to your own case in particular. You have conceived an affection for Sir Valentine Malvern, and you believe that your happiness depends upon the fulfilment of the engagement existing between you. Your relatives have encouraged this attachment on your part, and they have sanctioned the projected union between yourself and Sir Valentine. Now, all this is very well as far as it goes, and belongs to the ordinary routine of life. But suppose that you suddenly found yourself marked out for the fulfilment of another destiny, and that you were called upon to renounce the imagined bliss of these spring-time hopes and first affections, suppose that you were made to understand that the career which in your artlessness you had chalked out for yourself is not the one which you are fated to pursue."

" Ah! I know, I feel," cried Florence, " how impossible it is to struggle against one's destiny. I have already had proofs of that. But surely you, madam, do not pretend to possess the key to the reading of the future as it regards myself? My fate is not in your hands, and Heaven cannot have whispered in your ear its intentions respecting me."

" No, my dear Florence," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, somewhat startled by the singularity of the young lady's observations, and not knowing precisely in what sense to read them, " I do not pretend to the gift of prophecy, and, believe me, that everything which I consider destined to occur to yourself may be foreshadowed without a miracle and will be accomplished by very natural means. But what I wish you to tell me is this: If it be possible to convince you that the basis upon which you have hitherto hoped to establish your happiness is not the true one, but that another, of a more solid and endurable character, and accompanied with circumstances of greater brilliancy and splendour, can be presented to your view, what would you say? What answer would you give? In what manner would you treat the proposition? "

Florence gazed upon Mrs. Waldegrave with a slight expression of anxiety in her countenance, as if she had caught a distant idea of the meaning which was buried within this cloud of sophistry and beneath this mass of words, but suddenly becoming profoundly grave, she said, in a low and mournful voice, "I do not dare for an instant imagine that you mean me any harm, or that you are capable of giving me bad counsel, but, at the same time, your words sink like a presentiment and a foreboding of evil into my heart."

"Perhaps I am not explicit enough yet," said Mrs. Waldegrave, feeling her way with the utmost caution.

"Do you — do you," falteringly asked the young maiden, "do you mean me to understand that I am to renounce the hope of ever becoming the wife of Sir Valentine Malvern?" and while a deep blush mantled upon her cheeks, the tears suddenly trickled forth from her eyes like an April shower moistening the leaves of the rose.

"I do mean," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "that if you were to consult your own happiness, you would put away the image of Sir Valentine Malvern from your heart."

"Why, oh, why?" demanded Florence, with mingled grief, indignation, and alarm. "Is it that I am no longer worthy of his love? Is it that you would have me love another? Or is it that he himself no longer loves me?"

"You, my dear child," answered Mrs. Waldegrave, with all the blandness of the most motherly air, "are worthy of being loved by the highest, the proudest, and the noblest."

"Then will you dare assert that Valentine has proved himself unworthy of my love?" asked Florence, starting from her seat. "No, no, you would not tell me that. I should not believe you, nothing on earth could make me believe you."

Mrs. Waldegrave now saw that in order to crush, as it were, the spirit of her intended victim, it was necessary to wound that spirit in its most tender point; and therefore, gazing with solemn earnestness and mournful gravity at the young damsel's countenance, she said, "Florence, prepare yourself to hear something of a most unpleasant character. Valentine Malvern is no longer worthy of you."

"It is false, it is false!" shrieked forth Florence, in a wild and piercing tone. Then, clasping her hands together in a paroxysm of acute mental agony, she exclaimed, "I may

be mad in some respects, mad with presentiments, mad when haunted by images of evil, mad when gazing upon certain incidents of the past, but never, never will my mind become so clouded as to suffer the belief to creep into it that Valentine is false. Madam, I begin to suspect you of some deep and sinister motives, or perhaps you may only say this to try me, to put my fortitude and my reason to the test? But, oh, if such be your object, it is cruelly carried out, most cruelly, most barbarously."

"Florence, my dear girl," said Mrs. Waldegrave, rising from her seat and taking both the young lady's hands in her own, "we will say no more concerning this subject upon the present occasion. I do not wish to torture you unnecessarily, nor put you to a test that is too severe. Will you allow me to introduce to you to-morrow a person of my acquaintance who will himself explain, much better than I can possibly do, all that is necessary for you to know?"

It instantaneously struck Florence that Mrs. Waldegrave was alluding to some physician, in plain terms, a mad-doctor, and though this impression was accompanied by a cold tremor passing rapidly over her entire frame, yet it almost immediately yielded to a feeling of relief and satisfaction as the second thought flashed to her mind that it was merely a test as to her sanity which she had to undergo. The interval of hesitation before she answered was therefore so short that it scarcely seemed any hesitation at all, and she said, in a tone the calmness of which somewhat surprised Mrs. Waldegrave, "Yes, I will see the person to whom you allude; and rest assured that I will not only hear him patiently, but will answer him without passion and without excitement."

"Ah! if you will only listen to him as patiently as you propose," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "you will be adopting the course most likely to conduce to your own interests."

"Be assured, madam, that I will do so," rejoined Florence. "And now, with your permission, I will retire to my chamber, for I wish to reflect upon all you have been saying."

"Do so, my dear child," was the answer, "and I will write and tell the person to whom I have alluded that he may be here to-morrow about midday."

Florence Eaton then quitted the apartment where this

dialogue had taken place, and retiring to her own chamber, she sat down to ponder upon everything she had heard.

" No," she said to herself, after a long and serious meditation, " it is impossible, utterly impossible, that Valentine can be false, equally impossible that by any act on his part he could become unworthy of my love. But, oh, could Mrs. Waldegrave's words have had another meaning, a meaning which, nevertheless, is to lead to the same end? Is it her opinion that the morbid condition of my mind renders me unfit to become the bride of Valentine Malvern, and that such an alliance, so far from sealing our happiness, would stamp the misery of us both? Alas! I fear that such was indeed the meaning of her words, a meaning which she, however, veiled as delicately and as skilfully as she could, but in such a manner that it might dawn in unto my comprehension when duly pondered upon. Yes, she told me, at the outset, that the course which young ladies mark out for themselves to pursue is not the one which destiny intends them to adopt, and she spoke to me of the necessity of renouncing all those ideas of happiness which I may have formed in the belief that I was to become Valentine's wife. In telling me that Valentine was false, it was perhaps but a well-meant artifice to prepare me for that other revelation, namely, that though he himself is true, yet that it is I who, in consequence of increasing mental infirmity, must no longer dream of the accomplishment of this alliance.

" And that person who is coming to-morrow, and of whom she spoke so guardedly and even with such mystery, who can it be, if not a physician, a mad-doctor, to tell me all that it is necessary I should know? Yes, yes, I understand everything now. Poor Mrs. Waldegrave had not the heart to make known to me the extent of my misfortune. She has left it for one who, being of the other sex, possesses a stronger nerve, and who from his avocations is more experienced in the fulfilment of these cruel offices. Alas, alas! are all my hopes of happiness wrecked in this world? But ah! what meant Mrs. Waldegrave by alluding to another career already marked out, another basis whereon my happiness is to be established? What meant she also by speaking of splendours and brilliancies in connection therewith? Oh, is it possible that my father, the prince regent, intends to take me away from those with whom my life has hitherto

been passed, and compel me to mingle in the sunshine gaieties of a court life? Yes, yes, this must have been her meaning; what other could she have had? But Heaven send that my father may rather banish me for ever from his mind, forget that there is such a being as myself in existence, than assert a parental control over me, and compel me to enter upon a new phase of existence which for me must be wretched in proportion to its brilliancy."

We have given this train of thoughts in the shape best calculated to render it intelligible to our readers, but it was not in the same unbroken continuity nor collected style that the unhappy girl pursued her meditations. Each new idea that entered her brain was fraught with a fresh agony; each successive conjecture that presented itself to her soul was marked by a renewed paroxysm of excitement. Tears and wringing of hands, convulsive sobs and deep sighs, intervals of blank despair and others of impassioned grief, — by all these evidences of a shattering mind and a breaking heart were the poor girl's thoughts characterized.

At length, after having remained for several hours alone in her chamber, she exclaimed aloud, " Suspense upon one point is intolerable. I will know the worst at once."

Then the beautiful creature, so lovely and so sweetly interesting even in the hour of her bitterest grief and profoundest despondency, summoned all her fortitude to her aid, marshalled all her energies, and with a mingled courage, dignity, and resignation retraced her way to the apartment where she had left Mrs. Waldegrave. Advancing with slow but firm step straight up to that lady, she said, " Madam, I have been reflecting upon all that took place between us ere now, and there is one point upon which I must demand — or beseech, if you will — an immediate explanation. You spoke of another career that was to open before me, and which is to be associated with circumstances of splendour and brilliancy. A suspicion as to your real meaning has entered my mind."

" Ah! you suspect something, my dear child? " exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with a degree of suspense up into the young damsel's countenance.

" Yes, I suspect," responded Florence, speaking slowly and deliberately, " that your words alluded to some design

which a very high personage may have formed concerning me."

"It is possible that you have fathomed my meaning, then?" cried Mrs. Waldegrave, in the most unfeigned astonishment. "I must have been more explicit, therefore, than it struck me I was."

"Explicit enough, madam," answered Florence, "to enable me to comprehend your meaning," and the young girl's countenance was pale as marble as she spoke, and her features were rigid, while in her voice there was a depth of tone which made her seem as if she were a statue speaking.

"How singular you look, my dear child!" said Mrs. Waldegrave, not knowing what to think of Miss Eaton's demeanour and conduct. "Are you sure that you have actually understood my meaning?"

"When I mention the name of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent," returned Florence, "is it not sufficient to convince you that I labour under no error as to the significancy of your words?"

"You are right, Florence, you are right!" exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave. "Tell me at once, then, what think you? What say you?"

"Madam," answered the young lady, in a cold and seemingly passionless voice, "when that person to whom you have alluded comes to-morrow, I will tell him everything that now occúpies my mind, I will explain myself thoroughly to him. And now, with your permission, I will keep my chamber until the hour to-morrow when the contemplated interview is to take place, for I have much need of self-communing."

"Be it as you will, my dear Florence," answered Mrs. Waldegrave, "although I would rather have you with me. But if you prefer being alone, I shall not attempt to thwart you. All your repasts shall be duly taken up to your chamber, and you have but to ring the bell in order to summon the servant for whatsoever you require."

Florence withdrew, and retraced her steps to her own apartment, but scarcely had she closed the door behind her when all the fortitude which had sustained her during this last brief colloquy with Mrs. Waldegrave suddenly giving way, she burst into tears, and, wringing her hands in despair, exclaimed, "It is then as I thought. Yes, not only am I

to be for ever separated from him who is dearer to me than life, but to be claimed by a parent whom — O God! that I should be compelled even to harbour the thought — I shrink from acknowledging as such."

And then poor Florence Eaton gave way to all the anguish produced by these reflections which were so full of a harrowing poignancy. The hours passed, the several meals were served up, but were removed again, untasted; and when night came, the unhappy girl, worn out with wretchedness and grief, gladly sought her couch, where, through sheer exhaustion, she speedily sank into the temporary oblivion of a sound slumber.

CHAPTER XLII

VARIOUS PROCEEDINGS IN DIFFERENT QUARTERS

It would be impossible to describe the grief and perplexity which prevailed at Hallingham Hall on account of the disappearance of Florence. The servants whom Lord Florimel had sent about in every direction to make inquiries were active in so doing throughout the rest of the night. They called at the cottages of all the farm-labourers around about, summoning them from their beds to answer the questions put to them; they also inquired at the taverns in the adjacent villages, to ascertain the circumstance under which any vehicle might have happened to stop there at about that time of the night when Florence was carried off; but all these inquiries were fruitless. Throughout the two following days Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine themselves rode about in all directions, renewing those inquiries, and still all was in vain. They were overwhelmed with affliction at the inutility of their search, and as for Pauline, she was well-nigh distracted.

The circumstance was involved in a mystery which appeared impenetrable, for it was impossible to fix even the slightest shadow of a suspicion upon any one as the author of the outrage. That Florence had been carried off by some individual who was enamoured of her charms was the only, and, indeed, the most natural way of accounting for the incident, but at this point conjecture suddenly stopped. A wall of adamant barred its progress, for, as above stated, there was no particular individual to whom suspicion pointed as the perpetrator of the wrong. It has been said in one of the early chapters of this narrative that the Florimels mingled but little in society, and received only a select number of guests at any time;

and amongst this circle of their friends there was no man who had ever been noticed to cast an improper look upon their cherished niece. Thus the young lady's mysterious disappearance was enveloped in the darkest mystery, and was too well calculated to engender the most serious apprehensions.

For the two days following the abduction Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern, as already said, were unwearied in their inquiries. On the third day, after a serious consultation together, they visited a very active justice of the peace residing in the neighbourhood, to whom they communicated everything that had occurred. This gentleman confessed himself entirely at fault as to the course that should be adopted, after the vain and ineffectual inquiries which had been already made, but he ultimately suggested that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the celebrated Bow Street officer, should be at once fetched from London and employed in the investigation. Valentine, who, as the reader will recollect, was well acquainted with the astute thief-taker, caught at the plan, and declared his intention of at once hurrying up to London and bringing Sampson down into Buckinghamshire. He and Lord Florimel returned to Hallingham Hall to order a carriage to be got in readiness, and while it was being prepared, Sir Valentine asked the nobleman whether it were advisable for him, when in London, to call at Carlton House, and inform his Royal Highness of the mysterious disappearance of Florence. But Lord Florimel urged Valentine not to delay an instant in bringing Lawrence Sampson back with him to Hallingham, observing, in addition, that it could serve no useful end to acquaint the prince with the occurrence, as his Royal Highness could do no more than they themselves were already performing, and the case was too urgent to admit of even the hour's delay that would be caused by a visit to Carlton House. Valentine coincided with Lord Florimel's view, and entering the carriage, sped away to London. It was late in the afternoon when he reached the metropolis, and proceeding at once to Long Acre, he was fortunate in finding Larry Sampson at home. The officer was just sitting down to a late dinner, after the day's business, but on hearing Sir Valentine's tale, he at once threw down his knife and fork, pushed aside the plate with its untasted contents, and lost not a moment

in accompanying the young baronet. In the middle of the night they reached Hallingham Hall.

After a few hours' rest, Larry Sampson was on the alert. He made Sir Valentine Malvern give him, as minutely as was possible, a description of the man in the labourer's dress who had decoyed him, with the false alarm of Lord Florimel's alleged danger, into the grove. He then asked for the cords with which the baronet had been bound to the tree, and these were given to him. He likewise obtained an exact description of Florence Eaton, even to the dress which she had on at the time of her disappearance, and which her lover and aunt, as well as her principal tiring-maid, well remembered. Possessed of these particulars, and taking the cords with him, Mr. Sampson set out alone upon his researches, declining to be accompanied by any one, as he declared that he could always manage these matters best by himself.

The scene now changes to Carlton House in London. It was the evening of that same day on which the dialogues described in the previous chapter took place between Florence Eaton and Mrs. Waldegrave, and at about ten o'clock Mrs. Gale was introduced by the faithful valet Germain into the presence of the prince regent.

"Ah! my active agent in pleasant mischief," exclaimed the prince, the moment the valet had retired and he was alone with the infamous woman in the apartment where he thus received her, "so you have come to give me good tidings at last? I received your letter two or three days ago, dated from Lechmere Grange in Oxfordshire, stating that the commission was so far fulfilled that the fair one who is to replace my lost Venetia was already caught in the toils which yourself and her ladyship had so cunningly spread to ensnare her. But how does the sweet bird take her captivity? Does she flutter in the cage, and will she fly away from me when I appear in her presence?"

"Prince," answered Mrs. Gale, "I think that when you see this sweet bird, as you call her, you will pronounce her to be a very miracle of beauty. The letter that I had the honour to address to your Royal Highness was necessarily brief, on account of being so cautiously worded, as I was fearful lest it should fall into other hands. I had, therefore, no

opportunity of expatiating upon the countless charms and attractions of this sweet creature. She is not only transcendingly beautiful, but chaste and pure beyond the possibility of doubt. She belongs to an excellent family, and yet is totally uncontaminated with the fevered atmosphere of fashionable life, having been brought up in comparative seclusion, and amidst a small and very select circle of friends."

"On my soul, Mrs. Gale, you are quite poetical in your description," observed the prince. "Is she as handsome as Venetia?"

"She is not so brilliantly handsome nor so voluptuously splendid as Lady Sackville," replied Mrs. Gale, "but she is endowed with a beauty far more ethereal, more refined, and more exquisite than that of her ladyship. She is a being whom I am convinced, sir, you will love passionately, ay, and love for ever, — which," added the infamous woman, with a smile, "is saying a great deal for your Royal Highness."

"I am almost afraid you are saying too much, Mrs. Gale," cried the prince, laughing. "You have indeed piqued my curiosity to an extraordinary degree, and I do already feel over head and ears in love with this sweet creature, before I have seen her. But ah!" ejaculated the prince, as a sudden idea struck him, and a cloud all in a moment fell upon his countenance, "what possible guarantee have I that all this is not a trick? I mean to say, how can I be assured that you and this Lady Lechmere who is leagued with you in the matter have not tutored some artful girl to play the coy and prudish maiden, when perhaps she is no more entitled to the name of maiden at all than the bar-girl in a canteen frequented by a whole regiment of horse-guards?"

"So confident am I that when your Royal Highness sees this divine creature you will at once fling aside the unworthy suspicion you have just hinted at, that I shall not ask for another guinea in the shape of recompense until after your Royal Highness's victory is achieved."

"Well, this is speaking fair enough at all events," exclaimed the prince. "But now tell me who the young lady is, for, if you recollect, you mentioned no name in your letter."

"Of course not, sir. I wrote guardedly, as in duty bound,"

responded Mrs. Gale. "Neither will I mention any name upon the present occasion, after the suspicion which you entertained."

"But I entertain it no longer," interrupted the prince. "Perhaps I was even wrong to mention it; but then, of course, I do not wish to have a world of trouble for nothing, and find myself made a fool of, after all. Who is she, I repeat?"

"Now, pray bridle your curiosity, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Gale, "and ask not a single question until you have seen the young lady. In fact, Lady Lechmere and I have resolved that you shall see her first before you know anything more, so convinced are we that at a glance your great experience in physiognomy will enable you to recognize the truth of all I am telling you concerning her innocence and purity. As for the beauty of the young lady, on that score there cannot be two opininons."

"Well, have your own way, then," said the prince, who never argued a point long. "But tell me, does she know me?"

"I cannot exactly say whether she knows your Royal Highness by sight, or not. It is most probable that she does, inasmuch as she habitually lives in London with her relatives. But this I do know, that she has never been to court nor attended the royal drawing-rooms. And now I am reminded," added Mrs. Gale, "that I have something more to state. Your Royal Highness will recollect that you gave me instructions not to let your name be mentioned in the presence of the young lady, whomsoever she were, that I might select to minister to your pleasure, but I am bound to inform you that Lady Lechmere, in a conversation which she had with our fair captive this morning, spoke the least thing too plainly while preparing her mind for your visit, and it would appear that, after two or three hours' solitary deliberation, the young creature's suspicions fell into the right path and led her on to the solution of the enigma."

"Ah! then she knows she is destined for me?" ejaculated the prince, but without any feeling of annoyance.

"She knows this much," answered Mrs. Gale, "that your Royal Highness is to pay your respects to her to-morrow in the middle of the day."

"The deuce!" cried the prince, "the notice is but short. It is true, however, the distance is but short also, — some forty-five miles, I believe, or thereabouts. Is it not so?"

"It is, sir, and the road is good. I left Lechmere Grange at five this evening, was in London at a little past nine, called at the palace and learned that your Royal Highness was entertaining company and could not see me till ten, at which hour I came back —"

"Well, well," cried the prince, somewhat impatiently, "spare those details, and tell me what said our young lady on learning that she would see me to-morrow. Was she pleased?"

"No; or else how could I expect you to believe in her purity and virtue? I was not present at the time, but Lady Lechmere tells me that she seemed almost stupefied, as it were, as if she felt that it was her destiny to become your mistress, and yet was filled with consternation at the idea. She said that when she saw you to-morrow she would explain all the thoughts that occupied her mind, and would deal most candidly with you."

"And what does Lady Lechmere argue from this?" inquired the prince.

"That you will have a very touching and pathetic scene," rejoined Mrs. Gale. "That the fair one, in short, will throw herself upon your mercy, appeal to your best feelings, and all that kind of thing. But that she will surrender without a desperate defence is not to be for a moment expected."

"Ah! then it will be truly piquant and exciting," exclaimed the prince. "I really long to see her. But are you sure that the adventure is a safe one, and that there are no cursed risks to run?"

"There are always risks in these matters," replied Mrs. Gale, "but I do not for an instant dread anything like noise or exposure. The young lady's relations will be, I dare say, very glad to effect a compromise agreeable to all parties. The circumstance need not prevent her marrying, and then she and her husband can live in the palace, just as Lord and Lady Sackville used to do."

"I see you have got it all nicely cut and dried for me, Mrs. Gale," said the prince, rising from his seat. "I do not think that we can now have anything more to talk about. I will run down in a plain travelling-carriage to-morrow in the

forenoon, and will be at Lechmere Grange as soon after midday as possible."

Mrs. Gale then took her departure, and proceeded to her house in Soho Square, where she spent the night; but she was up soon after daybreak in order to speed back to Lechmere Grange and give due notice of the prince's intended coming.

Meanwhile Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been pursuing his inquiries not only in Buckinghamshire, but had also pushed them into the adjoining counties of Bedford and Oxford. In the first place, he had questioned the keepers at all the turnpikes upon the public roads in that part of the country, and this was a proceeding which it had never struck Florimel nor Sir Valentine Malvern to adopt. The result was that Mr. Sampson learned that on the particular evening referred to as that of the abduction, and at about ten o'clock, the keeper of a turnpike remembered a carriage and four horses driving up at a tremendous pace, and by the light streaming from his own window he caught a glimpse of the beautiful face of a young lady looking through the glass of the carriage. The man was struck by the expression of the countenance at the time, because he fancied it looked anxious and frightened; and he noticed that it was shaded by a profusion of light hair, falling in long curls from under a sort of gipsy bonnet such as young ladies were accustomed to wear in those times when in the country. Beyond this information the turnpike-keeper could give no details of importance. He did not recollect the colour of the carriage, but he remembered that it had four horses, with two postilions, and a servant seated on the box.

Mr. Sampson was convinced in his own mind that he had thus obtained a clue to the object of his search, and that the countenance which the turnpike-man had noticed was that of Florence Eaton. He accordingly followed up his inquiries along that same road, and managed to trace the carriage and four into Oxfordshire, but there he lost scent of it altogether, and therefore came to the conclusion that it had turned out of the main route into some branch road or by-lane. But he now prosecuted his researches all about the district into which he had succeeded in tracing the equipage, and visiting each town and village, he endeavoured

to find out whether any cord answering a particular description had been recently purchased in that neighbourhood. At length this portion of his inquiry was crowned with success, and he discovered the shop at which the very cord which had bound Malvern's limbs, and which he had brought with him, was procured. The purchaser of that cord was recollected, as to his personal appearance, by the shopkeeper, to whom, however, the man's name and all other particulars concerning him were utterly unknown; but from the description given, Sampson had no doubt the individual was the same person in the labourer's dress who had decoyed Sir Valentine into the grove. At another village, two or three miles distant, Mr. Sampson ascertained that some black crape had been purchased at about the same time as the cord, and by an individual exactly answering the above description; so that the material of which the masks were made that were worn by the three accomplices had been likewise bought in the same district as the cord, and by the same man, was a fact fully established. Mr. Sampson's researches were therefore now directed toward the discovery of this man, and at length he succeeded in hearing of such a person. Once upon the track, his inquiries were quickly followed up until he obtained positive information that the individual in question was none other than a domestic in the service of a lady of quality whose country-seat was not many miles distant from the villages where the previous links in the chain of evidence had been detected.

The prosecution of this search and the following up of the various traces which led him on step by step to the final discovery where Florence Eaton was, had occupied several days, and it was between ten and eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the eighth day after the abduction that Mr. Sampson returned to Hallingham Hall. The results of his proceedings were instantly made known to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern, and a carriage and four was at once got in readiness to bear them all three to the mansion where Florence Eaton was held captive. The distance from Hallingham to that mansion was about sixteen miles, and consequently, with four fleet horses, it could be accomplished in about an hour and a half. Fortunately Lord Florimel was in the commission of the peace for Oxfordshire as well as Buckinghamshire, and therefore he was enabled to arm him-

self and companions with an authority to take decisive measures should any opposition or resistance be experienced at the place whither they were now proceeding for the recovery of Florence.

CHAPTER XLIII

LECHMERE GRANGE

At the very time that the carriage and four, containing Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, was flying along the highroad into Oxfordshire, Florence Eaton was seated in her own chamber at the mansion of her captivity, preparing her mind for the supposed interview with the mad-doctor; for that such was the character of the individual whom she was to meet soon after midday she still implicitly believed. Since her second interview with Mrs. Waldegrave, on the previous day, she had kept her chamber, the lady's-maid who was in special attendance upon her serving her meals. But these, as intimated at the conclusion of a previous chapter, went away untasted, and even on the morning of the day of which we are now writing Florence had taken nothing but some tea. Thus for four and twenty hours nought in the shape of substantial food had passed the poor girl's lips.

It was now verging toward noon, and she was seated in her chamber, endeavouring to arrange in her mind all that she should say to the physician whom she supposed about to visit her. She had resolved to tell him everything, the whole history of her parentage, the morbid feelings which the knowledge of that secret had engendered in her mind, and the sensation of loathing and horror with which she had been gradually led on by those feelings to contemplate the image of her royal father. It was the purpose of the poor girl to make a friend of the physician, for that he would be accessible to such sympathy she did not doubt, and she even went so far as to picture to herself a kind-hearted, and fatherly old gentleman who would listen to her with interest and attention and do what he could to serve her.

"I will ask him," thought Florence to herself, "to go at once to my uncle and aunt, to tell them that the prince purposes to take me away altogether from their guardianship and compel me to plunge into the dizzy whirl of a court life. I will beseech him to urge those dear relatives to take me home to them again at once, and to save me from my own father. I will tell the worthy physician that if it be really hoped to restore my mind to the equanimity it once enjoyed, this aim can only be accomplished by allowing me to relapse into the calm and tranquil tenor of existence which I until lately led; but that it would unsettle my mind for ever were I to be surrendered up to the guardianship of that parent whom, alas! I cannot love, and whose image fills me with a horror and a loathing stronger than all my powers of resistance."

In this manner did the musings of Florence Eaton continue, so that, as the reader will perceive, she looked forward with hope and cheerfulness to the interview which she fancied she was to have with a physician. There was no presentiment of evil at this hour in the young maiden's mind. She indeed felt happier than she had yet done since the night of her abduction, for she confidently anticipated that either this same day or the next would restore her to her uncle and aunt at Hallingham Hall. And did she not likewise think of Valentine? Oh, yes, and she also hoped that she would yet become his bride.

It was a little past noon when she heard the sounds of wheels approaching up the avenue which intersected the park, and looking forth from her chamber window, which was in the front of the house, she observed a plain travelling-carriage driving up to the principal entrance of the mansion.

"Here is the physician," she said to herself; but her window was so situated that she could not catch a glimpse of the individual who alighted from the carriage.

Ten minutes now elapsed, during which interval Florence Eaton felt an increasing excitement, and, for the first time this day, vague fears and apprehensions relative to the supposed physician's visit began to rise up in her mind. What if he should prove otherwise in character and disposition than she had imagined? What if he were stern, austere, and morose, instead of benevolent and kind? What if he were to refuse to allow her to return to her relatives,

or to interest himself any way in her behalf? What, in short, if he had even come to bear her away to London and hand her over to the charge of the prince? Oh, now indeed were these misgivings crowding in rapidly, and still more rapidly, upon the young maiden's mind, and now also did a presentiment of evil, dark and ominous, overshadow her soul with a deepening gloom, as the storm-clouds gather suddenly upon a sky previously tranquil and serene.

"It appears as if some crisis in my destiny were at hand," thought Florence to herself, and as she caught a glimpse of her countenance in the mirror, when wandering about the room with increasing excitement, she recoiled from the ghastly aspect of her own features. Then, sinking upon a chair, she pressed her hand upon her bosom to still the strong pulsations of her heart; and as the apprehensions of coming evil gained more and more upon her, she felt that it was only by a strong effort she could prevent herself from bursting forth into a fit of wild, hysterical screaming.

Presently she heard a footstep approaching the door. Rising to her feet, she gave utterance to the word "Now!" in an abrupt, decisive tone, and all in a moment she found herself cool and collected. The tempest within her had lulled in an instant, but it was a calm unnatural to a degree. She had not, however, time for further analysis of her thoughts, as the door opened and Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance.

"How are you to-day, my dear child?" she said, with the most amiable look and in the kindest tone.

"I know not how I feel," answered Florence. "But that carriage which is just arrived —"

"It is he whom you are to meet," was the answer given by Mrs. Waldegrave, who anticipated the meaning of the question.

"Then let me go to him at once," Florence immediately replied, "for the sooner the interview takes place, the better."

"Yes, you shall go at once, my dear girl," answered Mrs. Waldegrave. Then suddenly catching Florence by the arm, she said, "But you intend to be calm, collected, and reasonable?"

"As I am at this moment," rejoined Florence, and she moved toward the door.

"You do not wish me to accompany you?" asked Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with some degree of anxiety upon the young lady, whose look and manner she was still at a loss altogether to comprehend.

"No, no," replied Florence, with a sort of feverish petulance. "I must see him alone. Let me go to him by myself. Where is he?"

"In the same room where we conversed together yesterday."

"Then I will proceed thither," and Florence sped away toward the apartment thus indicated.

A few moments brought her there. She would not allow herself to pause, even for an instant, lest the courage which at present sustained her should all in a moment give way, but she hastened on, with that kind of desperate feeling which impels the individual in cases of suspense to seek to know the best or worst at once.

She entered the room. A person was standing at one of the windows, looking out, and consequently with his back toward her. The door still remained open in her hand as he turned around, and then, oh, amazement and horror! instead of the stranger-countenance of a physician, the well-known face of the prince regent was at once revealed to her.

"Florence! Good God, Florence!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, in a voice of mingled wonder and consternation.

But a wild affright seized upon the maiden, and she bounded away from the apartment. The prince hurried after her, crying, "Florence! Florence!"

"No, no!" she shrieked forth, and onward she flew, as if wings were fastened to her feet.

"Florence, my dear girl, Florence dearest, I beseech you to stop," exclaimed the prince, pursuing her as quickly as he could.

She had reached the landing, and glanced back at the foot of the next ascent of stairs to see if he were following her, but the instant she caught a glimpse of his approaching form, she ran wildly up the staircase, still shrieking forth, "No, no!"

"She is mad, poor girl! She is mad!" cried the prince, and terror lending wings also to his feet, despite the corpulency of his person, he still hastened after her.

Florence had now gained that long passage whence the

chambers of the domestics opened on either side, and there she paused to gather breath, clinging pale and trembling to the banisters, with mingled anguish and terror distorting every lineament of the countenance that was naturally so sweet, so lovely. But, hark! footsteps are pursuing, hastily do they ascend the stairs, and in another instant she again beholds her father close behind.

"No, no," she repeats, in still more wild and thrilling notes, "you shall not take me away with you! The image of my mother beckons me to beware."

Thus speaking, she flew along the passage, and reached the steps leading up into the loft above.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the prince. "She is mad! She will do herself a mischief!" and onward he sped in the pursuit.

He also reached the steps in an incredibly short space of time, considering the unwieldiness of his person, but pausing at the bottom to recover breath, he called out, "Florence, Florence, wherefore do you fly away from me? Fear nothing. I will bear you hence. You shall not stay here another moment, you shall go away with me."

"No, no!" were the thrilling tones of a still wilder anguish, which rang through the loft above, and falling upon the prince's ear, seemed to penetrate to his very brain.

Up the steps he sped, he entered the loft, and beheld Florence fling a wild, affrighted look over her shoulder, as she was precipitating herself onward to the farther extremity of the place.

"Florence, I conjure you!"

"No, no!" was the wildly repeated cry, and as she uttered it, she drew back a bolt which held fast a door at that end of the loft.

"Florence!" exclaimed the prince, bounding forward to catch her.

But at that instant the door which she had reached was flung open, and the blaze of sunlight burst into the loft. Nothing save the sunny atmosphere seemed to be beyond that threshold, and as the hapless maiden disappeared from the prince's view, the terrific shriek that thrilled from her lips pierced like an ice-shaft through his brain.

"O God!" he cried, in appalling agony, and fell forward senseless upon the floor of the loft.

During the few minutes occupied in the scene which we have just been relating a travelling-carriage and four had entered the park and was dashing up the avenue to the front of the mansion. The windows of the vehicle were down, and a countenance thrust forth was anxiously surveying the exterior of the building which the equipage was thus approaching. This was Sir Valentine Malvern, who, with all a lover's natural excitement, was looking forth in the hope of catching the first glimpse of his well-beloved's face at one of the numerous windows of the immense structure.

"It is a fine old place, this Lechmere Grange," said Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with characteristic coolness, for nothing ever ruffled the equanimity of the Bow Street officer.

"Yes, a fine old place," answered Lord Florimel, to whom the remark was addressed. "But who would have thought," he immediately added, in mingled excitement and indignation, "that a person of Lady Lechmere's rank and position in society could have been base enough to lend herself to this outrage which is still so unaccountable? For I cannot possibly conceive what motive —"

At this instant a terrific cry burst forth from the lips of Sir Valentine Malvern, and, almost simultaneously, another but still more piercing and more agonizing shriek thrilled through the air.

"Just God! 'tis Florence!" exclaimed Lord Florimel, as he beheld from the window of the carriage the same appalling spectacle which had elicited that burst of mingled horror and despair from Sir Valentine Malvern.

The carriage stopped suddenly, for the postilions, who had likewise beheld the tremendous tragedy, reined in their steeds at the angle of the building nearest to the spot where the occurrence had just taken place.

Alas! the reader cannot fail to have comprehended the nature of this shocking tragedy. The door through which Florence had disappeared from the view of the prince in the loft opened, not into some adjacent room, as the poor girl in the bewilderment of her feelings had doubtless fancied, but into the very air itself. It was the one to which the old disused crane belonged, the one, in short, that opened from the end of the building right upon the abyss below. Down she had fallen, down, down, that sweet angelic

girl, down from the tremendous height, upon a parterre of flowers that lay immediately beneath.

When Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, leaping from the carriage, rushed to the spot, they raised the inanimate form in their arms, and though it was not mangled nor crushed nor even disfigured, yet life was extinct. The lovely and the innocent was no more; she had fallen through the sunny air, warm and glowing as her own generous heart in life had been, and her death-bed was formed of flowers as sweet and beautiful as herself.

CHAPTER XLIV

CONCLUSION

We now take up our pen for the purpose of bringing the present narrative to a close, and recording the necessary farewell words in respect to some of the characters that have figured in our drama, as well as duly chronicling the fate that overtook others. Were we to give in minute details that rapid summary of particulars which we are about to sketch in mere outline, we should be enabled yet to extend our history to many additional chapters; but the doleful tragedy which we have just related — a tragedy so replete with horror and woe — has indisposed us for the promulgation of our tale. Besides, the heart sickens at the thought of the guilty career of that prince whose misdeeds have furnished the groundwork for our past narrative, and we long to escape from the unnatural atmosphere which envelops his memory.

About the same time that the eventful drama was taking place in Lechmere Grange, Bencull, the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker were put upon their trial at the Old Bailey for the murder of Nell Gibson. The Buttoner, who had turned king's evidence, was the principal witness against them. When placed together in the dock, the four prisoners, who had not seen each other since their committal to Newgate, — they having been there kept in separate cells for security's sake, — exchanged grim smiles of recognition. Their hardihood had not forsaken them; desperate as their lives had been, so did they still continue in their conduct during the ordeal that was to lead to death. As for the Hangman, he preserved a degree of brutal indifference and hardened ruffianism which stamped him as a monster in human shape. When the Buttoner made his appearance in the witness-box, Daniel Coffin

rattled his chains furiously, shook his clenched fists at the approver, and vomited forth such a torrent of dreadful imprecations and hideous curses against the man that the whole of the crowded court was shocked and appalled. The judge was compelled to inform the ferocious prisoner that unless he held his tongue he must be removed forcibly, and the trial would proceed without him. Daniel Coffin accordingly desisted, but throughout the Buttoner's evidence he maintained a succession of savage growls rather resembling those of a wild beast than of a human being. The charge was fully proved against himself and his comrades, and sentence of death was passed upon them in due form. It was therefore unnecessary to prosecute the Hangman further, and thus no cognizance was taken by the tribunal of the double murder which the dreadful monster had perpetrated at the fence's house in Whitechapel.

We must observe, however, that when the judge had announced their doom to the four prisoners, the Hangman gave vent to another volley of horrible imprecations, not merely levelled against the Buttoner, but likewise against the judge, the prosecuting counsel, and all who had been in any way mixed up with the judicial proceedings. The frightful strain was taken up by his three comrades, and while thus pouring forth their rage, they were carried back to the gaol. There they were placed in the condemned cells, each in a separate one, and positive orders were given that Daniel Coffin was to be allowed no opportunity of communication with any one outside the prison walls. It subsequently transpired that this command was issued in consequence of instructions sent direct from the Home Office. Doubtless the prince regent thought that the more closely Daniel Coffin's lips were kept sealed, the better. The fellow did, however, give the turnkeys the particulars of all that had ever taken place between himself and the prince, — especially the trick played in respect to Dysart, and the affair of Westminster Bridge; but either the turnkeys did not believe him, or, if they did, were too discreet to mention the circumstances elsewhere.

We must add that Coffin wrote a letter to the prince, begging his Royal Highness to commute the sentence which had been passed into one of transportation for life, but the epistle, wherein threats and entreaties were strangely

jumbled, remained unanswered. Perhaps, indeed, it was never sent at all by the turnkey to whom it was entrusted for the purpose. In short, Daniel Coffin and his three accomplices in crime suffered death on the scaffold in the Old Bailey, their ruffian-hardihood enduring to the very last; and thus the man who had so often officiated as the public executioner on strangulation-days was himself sent out of existence on the same stage where he had aided in launching so many miserable wretches into eternity.

The funeral of poor Florence Eaton was conducted in a private and unostentatious manner; her remains were deposited in the village church near Hallingham Hall, Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern being the chief mourners. The prince regent had signified his desire to attend the obsequies, but Lord Florimel, in reply, gave his Royal Highness to understand that if he appeared upon the scene it would be considered little better than an outrage, not only to the feelings of those true mourners who would be present on the occasion, but likewise to the memory of her whose ashes were to be consigned to the dust. When the funeral was over, Lord and Lady Florimel went abroad and remained upon the Continent for many years. They vowed at their departure that they would never return to England again so long as that prince who had caused their beloved niece's death exercised the sovereign sway.

Thus, during the remainder of his regency, and throughout the period of his reign as king of England, Lord and Lady Florimel continued to abide in foreign climes; and it was only when William IV ascended the throne that they returned to England, after an absence of fifteen years. The violence of their grief for the loss of the beloved Florence had long been mellowed down into a mournful remembrance of the departed girl; but they never again mingled in the gaieties of life, but devoted the rest of their days to deeds of benevolence and charity. Seldom is it that persons bearing an aristocratic title succeed in winning the love of the poorer orders, but the names of Lord and Lady Florimel were never mentioned by the suffering and oppressed save in terms of gratitude and respect. They bestowed not their gold upon the canting hypocrites of Exeter Hall, they afforded no subsidies to the associations whose objects are to convert the heathen thousands of miles away, but all

their sympathies and their aids were exercised amongst the poor, the destitute, and the indigent whose name is legion in the British Isles.

Sir Valentine Malvern, immediately after the funeral of the perished Florence, had besought the Florimels to permit him to take up his abode at Hallingham Hall, for he declared that the only way in which he could be induced to resign himself to the fate that had thus so cruelly separated him from everything he had loved or could ever love again upon earth was by dwelling near the spot where the remains of the departed girl were laid, so that he might visit that tomb of hallowed memories, that sepulchre of his own heart's withered hopes and blighted affections. Ere leaving England, therefore, Lord and Lady Florimel gave Sir Valentine the mournful permission which he sought, and he took up his abode at Hallingham. On every Sabbath morning, when the village rustics and maidens were repairing to the church, they beheld Sir Valentine Malvern bending his way on foot slowly thither, and on entering the sacred edifice, as he passed to his pew, would he pause near the simple but elegant monument which marked the resting-place of Florence Eaton, and the tears would trickle down his cheeks. Then, the service being over, he would remain behind the rest of the congregation, and when the church was cleared he would seek the sacred spot again, and kneeling on the cold marble, would pray a long time in silence, while fresh tears trickled down his manly cheeks. The old sextoness, who knew the sad history, never offered to lock the church door, nor even ventured to show any sign of impatience at being thus kept waiting while Sir Valentine, mourning over his lost one, prayed for strength to support his bereavement. Sometimes in the week-days he would call upon the sextoness, borrow the church keys, and pass hours alone together within the walls of that humble village temple. Many and many a golden guinea was slipped by Sir Valentine into the hands of the old sextoness, so that his bounty became a handsome annuity to the worthy woman.

Years passed, and still Sir Valentine Malvern continued to dwell at Hallingham Hall. His grief became attempered to a manly resignation, and if he were never, on the one hand, exhilarated into joy, on the other hand, his feelings were never warped by misanthropy. Sometimes he received

a few select friends at the hall, and was frequently visited by his half-sisters and their husbands, and on those occasions, while performing all the duties of hospitality in a becoming manner, his deportment, though far from cheerful, was nevertheless by no means calculated to diffuse an unpleasant gloom around him. But he never loved again. The earth possessed not an angel in female shape who had the power to roll the stone from his sepulchral heart; that heart was the tomb in which the image of the cherished Florence was preserved, embalmed with the holy fragrance of an imperishable fidelity. After Lord and Lady Florimel returned to England, Sir Valentine Malvern still continued to occupy Hallingham Hall. At their death, which happened in 1847, both dying within the same year, that mansion, together with the Buckinghamshire estate, was bequeathed to him, and there he still resides at the present day, the object of love and veneration on the part of all his tenants and the inhabitants of the surrounding district.

We must here observe that when the frightful tragedy happened at Lechmere Grange, it was only through a generous consideration for the piteous entreaties which the prince proffered to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine that they could be induced to refrain from giving the whole affair the utmost publicity. Perhaps they likewise thought that the wretched man was sufficiently punished by the contemplation of the fearful ruin which his wickedness had wrought, and that it were better to leave him to the stings of his own conscience than hold him up to the execration of society. Never was there a more piteous spectacle of a proud and wicked man's utter humiliation than that which the prince regent presented when suing for mercy and forbearance, almost at the very feet of the afflicted uncle and lover of the perished girl. Mr. Lawrence Sampson, who was a witness of the scene, felt an indescribable loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary who, in his greedy pursuit of licentious pleasures, had been fated to become the cause of his own innocent and lovely daughter's death. But, for the reasons above glanced at, it was finally resolved by Florimel and Malvern to allow the veil of secrecy to be thrown as much as possible over the incidents which led to the tragedy, and though a coroner's investigation took place, yet the particulars were never published to the world.

Thus, inasmuch as the principal actor in the shocking drama was suffered to go unpunished, it was impossible to hand over the subordinate accomplices in the crime to the hands of justice. But it may be observed, as an illustration of the fact that Heaven often deals retributive justice where man fails to inflict it, that not a single soul who was engaged in the circumstances of that lamentable tragedy prospered long afterward, while the career of some was cut short by a violent death. For instance, Lady Lechmere (the false Mrs. Waldegrave), when visiting the grange three or four years after the catastrophe, was so terrified by the belief that the spirit of the departed girl appeared to her in the middle of the night that she started up from her sleep in the wildest alarm, sprang from her couch, and rushing along the passage in the dark to summon her servants, tripped over a mat, fell with her head in contact against the marble pedestal supporting a statue, and lived but a few minutes to explain to those whom her cries gathered around her the cause of the catastrophe.

At her death, as there was no direct heir to her property, it was all thrown into the court of chancery, the grange was shut up, and the domestics were discharged. The footman, who in the disguise of a labourer had borne his part in the outrage against Florence Eaton, took to the highway, and two or three years afterward suffered for his crimes upon the scaffold; while the three men (also servants in Lady Lechmere's household) who had worn the masks on the memorable night of Miss Eaton's abduction became poachers and were killed in a sanguinary fight with gamekeepers.

From the date of the tragedy at Lechmere Grange everything seemed to go wrong with Mrs. Gale (the fictitious Mrs. Spencer). A fire completely destroyed all her property at the house of infamy in Soho Square, and as she was not insured, the loss was very serious. She however took another house of the same character, though on a less sumptuous scale, but the death of a foreigner which took place there under very suspicious circumstances led to her committal to prison on the coroner's warrant. Newgate was crowded at the time, the gaol-fever broke out, and Mrs. Gale was one of the first victims to its rage.

Sally and Dick Melmoth, after the execution of Daniel Coffin, discovered a considerable sum of money concealed

in the cellar of the house in Fleet Lane, and this they of course appropriated to their own use. Yielding to all kinds of extravagances and plunging into the deepest excesses, they were not long in making away with their resources, and in less than a year they sunk down to the lowest pitch of poverty, at length becoming absorbed in that living mass of demoralization, squalor, and wretchedness which forms the tremendous refuse of our barbarous system of civilization.

As for Jack the Foundling, he conducted himself tolerably well for a few years in the West Indies, but the influence of old habits gradually returning, he was led to self-appropriate some of his employer's money to minister unto his extravagances, and was summarily dismissed his situation. He then returned to England, where accident revealed to him the secret of his birth; or, at all events, he was led, by some means or another, to form a pretty shrewd conjecture upon the point. But his claims upon the Princess Sophia being utterly ignored in that quarter, he became to her a source of incessant annoyance, vexation, persecution, and terror, until the day of her death, which happened but a few years ago. He is still knocking about town, living Heaven only knows how, sunk deep into the slough of dissipation and profligacy, but often exciting the wonder and interest of the frequenters of public-house parlours and tap-rooms by relating the circumstances of his birth, — of which, however, he has but a dim knowledge, so that the greater proportion of the wonderful things he recites are drawn from the fountains of his own imagination.

The Buttoner, having turned king's evidence against his accomplices in the murder of Nell Gibson, had his life spared, but was sentenced to transportation. It was, however, found impossible to carry this judgment into effect, on account of the injuries he had received from the Hangman on the occasion of the affray at Mrs. Young's. He was therefore transferred to the hulks, in the infirmary of which he died within a few months after the trial. As for old Mother Franklin, she succumbed to the serious treatment she received on the same occasion; and Mrs. Young, being compelled to have a limb amputated from a similar cause, took to drinking brandy ere the stump was healed, so that inflammation was brought on, and she died miserably.

William Taggarty continued for some years in his shop

on Mutton Hill, but at length he removed to a better neighbourhood and a larger establishment, and by gradually falling into a different course of business, contrived to amass a fortune without involving himself in the meshes of the law. Instead of buying stolen tea, coffee, pepper, mustard, vinegar, jars of pickles, and so forth, he took to the safer mode of purchasing inferior qualities in a legitimate way, and then adulterating them with all kinds of abominations. By these means — and no possible means are surer to attain the desired end — he rose to the rank of an honest and respectable tradesman, so that at last he became a somewhat important man in his parish, grew great at vestries, filled the office of overseer in a manner hateful to the poor but delightful to the board of guardians, and so completely won the good opinion of the vicar that through this reverend gentleman's influence he obtained the honourable post of churchwarden. While filling that office, no parishioner was more regular in his devotions nor could put on a more sanctimonious countenance than Mr. William Taggarty. Of course this worthy tradesman lived universally respected, although perhaps he himself might occasionally laugh in his sleeve when, having duly sanded his sugar, sloe-leaved his tea, chicoried his coffee, turmeriked his mustard, vitrioled his vinegar, and bone-dusted his arrowroot, he went to church on a Sunday and helped to swell the chorus of " Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable sinners! "

Doctor Copperas and Doctor Thurston pursued their useful and honourable career to a good old age. These excellent members of the profession were never known to have an angry word with each other. It must, however, be allowed that this might have arisen less from the Christian feeling which animated them than from the circumstance that their undisturbed unanimity was marvellously productive of fees. Doctor Copperas died first, and when his will was opened, the following sentence was found in the document: " I will and bequeath my valuable library of medical works to a gentleman who in private life is adorned with all the qualities calculated to win the esteem and love of those who bask in the sunshine of his friendship, and who as an ornament to his profession stands unrivalled: it is with pleasure that I here record the name of Doctor Thurston." Some three or four years afterward, when Doctor Thurston himself

was summoned to another world, to meet all the patients who had gone thither before him, his last will and testament also contained a passage which we must quote, and which ran as follows: "In bequeathing my valuable collection of books to that philanthropic institution which I and a certain revered friend of mine (recently dead) had the honour and the happiness of founding, I wish it to be distinctly understood that, even if no such name as that of Doctor Thurston had been associated with the establishment of that institution, it would nevertheless have arisen into existence all the same from the humanity as well as the unparalleled talent of that dear deceased friend, Doctor Copperas."

Sir Rolando and Lady Tash managed to live on pretty comfortable terms with each other. They had a large family of children, all of whom were the exact image of the redoubtable officer himself, with the single exception of the eldest son, who bore so striking a resemblance to the prince regent that all friends and acquaintances frequently alluded to the circumstance, no doubt with congratulatory intention, as if it were a remarkable honour to have the lineaments of a member of the royal race reflected in the features of a scion of a private family. But whenever the coincidence was mentioned at the dinner-table, Sir Rolando Tash invariably filled a large tumbler to the brim and tossed it down his capacious throat, while Lady Tash was as constantly seized with a sudden fit of sneezing or coughing, which compelled her to apply her handkerchief to her face.

Lilian Halkin remained abroad for three or four years after the catastrophe of Dover Cliffs, handsomely provided for, in a pecuniary sense, by the bounty of her friends in England. At the expiration of that time a sudden longing took her to return to her native land, but while on her way hither she was seized with a sudden illness at Calais, where she breathed her last. Her remains are interred in the cemetery outside the walls of the town.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson retained his post as chief officer at Bow Street for some years after the period of which our narrative has treated, and when he retired it was to settle down in a neat little villa at Clapton, and enjoy the remainder of his existence in the company of a pretty wife and with the aid of the handsome competence he had acquired during many years of bustle and activity.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Malpas, who had the honour of passing one night with the prince regent at Carlton House, and therefore, as this lady has received such special mention in our narrative, it may be as well to state what afterward became of her. Though she went into mourning for her husband the colonel, when the news of his death reached her, yet she did not particularly grieve for his loss, and precisely one year afterward she was persuaded by Alderman Tubbs, corn-chandler and spectacle-maker (the latter denomination alluding to the particular company to which he belonged), to proceed with him to the altar. Although some thirty years older than herself, with a very red nose and somewhat drunken in his habits as well as snuffy-looking on the front of his shirt, yet being immensely rich and next in rotation for the honours of the mayoralty, the lady could not do otherwise than consent to change her name from the aristocratic one of Malpas to the less euphonious one of Tubbs, and, as the newspapers some time afterward declared, "she fulfilled the high and difficult post of lady mayoress with a mingled dignity and affability which must long dwell in the memory of the citizens of London." It chanced, too, that during the mayoralty an address had to be presented to the prince regent, on which occasion the honour of knighthood was conferred upon her worthy husband, and thenceforth were they known as Sir Jacob and Lady Tubbs. From all we have ever learned, she made an excellent wife for the worthy civic functionary, but when in tender moments of confidence speaking of past events, we believe that she somehow or another always forgot to mention the romantic little adventure which for one night had made her the bedfellow of a prince.

Mrs. Emmerson and Arabella sank down into the deepest poverty, and when they applied to their friends and acquaintances of better days, they experienced the cruelest rebuffs. For about three years they had a sad battle with the world, earning a precarious livelihood by needlework, and often experiencing the direst need. Few, however, who had known them in better times, and who were now acquainted with their distress, pitied them in their latter position, for when living in a mansion and rolling in their carriage at Clapham, they had given themselves such airs

and behaved with so much hauteur and arrogance, that theirs was the very pride which according to poetic justice should experience a fall. At the end of the third year of misery, however, they received a visit from Mr. Theodore Varian, who shed tears on contemplating the picture of distress which their abode and their own personal appearance presented to his view. He told them that times had altered with him, and that fortune had so far smiled upon his industry as to enable him to supply a hundred pounds for their immediate wants, and to promise fifty pounds a year for the future. Having thus explained himself, he did not wait to be thanked, but hurried away, profoundly affected.

Theodore had become the husband of Mary Owen, and a partner in the great mercantile firm of Chapman & Co. He had settled in London, after having for some time ably conducted the branch establishment at Geneva; and as riches accumulated around him, and his name grew associated with many noble deeds of benevolence and charity, seldom did it occur to any one who knew him to pause and ask "whether there were not some queer thing formerly attached to his character." He has proved a good husband and a fond father, Mary making him an excellent wife, and being quoted by all their friends as a pattern mother. There are times when Mr. Varian looks back with sorrow and remorse upon the bitterness with which he pursued Emmerson to the scaffold; but the stings of conscience are deprived of nearly all their poignancy when he thinks of the atonement which he endeavoured to make toward the widow and orphan daughter whom Emmerson had left behind.

Lord and Lady Sackville have religiously fulfilled the determination they made on abandoning a court life, and have ever since devoted themselves to domestic enjoyments. They have never allowed the transactions of the past to intrude upon their minds in such a way as to render them distant and cool to each other, and though that sublime confidence and that exquisite delicacy of feeling which are the elements of pure love can form no part of the bond linking them together, yet a very sincere friendship exists between them, and it may even be called a love after their own fashion. Besides, Sackville has ever been proud of his splendid wife, and she has all along entertained a similar feeling in respect to her handsome husband, and thus, all things considered,

they have lived and still live on happily, comfortably, and sociably enough together. That Lady Sackville has remained faithful to her duty as a wife ever since her retirement from court is beyond all suspicion, and that Horace at the same time settled down into habits equally steady is likewise certain. They have no children, but, on that very account, have exhibited the most devoted attachment to their nephews and nieces, as well as to the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Varian, who are frequent visitors at the country residence which they purchased and where they habitually reside. We may add that from the day on which she quitted Carlton House Lady Sackville never again beheld the prince regent, and though at first he wrote her several letters, it was always her husband that answered them.

We have just spoken of certain nephews and nieces toward whom Lord and Lady Sackville were much attached. The reader has doubtless already guessed that these were the children that blessed the union of the young Marquis of Leveson with the charming and well-beloved Louisa. Such was the case. Never has the world known a happier pair than our noble-hearted hero and our gentle heroine. From the day of their marriage down to the present time (for they are still alive, with a splendid family grown up around them) not a care has disturbed their felicity, not a cloud has darkened the pathway of their existence. In them virtue has been well rewarded, and in the conduct of their sons and daughters do they behold the bright reflection of their own example.

We said that not a single care has intervened to mar their happiness. We should, however, qualify the assertion by stating that there was one incident of sorrow which occurred a few years after their marriage, and this was the death of the excellent Miss Stanley. But that worthy aunt departed not this life ere she had fondled three or four of her niece's children in her arms, and as her earthly career had been characterized by every virtue, so was her death-bed attended by every consolatory and tranquillizing influence.

Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon have likewise been supremely happy in the marriage state, and when in the first years of their union the baronet beheld his beautiful wife radiant with smiles, and when he dandled upon his knees the two blooming boys with which she presented him,

he could not help looking back in surprise and amazement upon the earlier portion of his life, wondering that he had ever been able to find satisfaction or pleasure in the paths of dissipation. He often laughed, too, when worthy Mrs. Baines, who retained the place of housekeeper until the day of her death, reminded him with a jocular air that "after all said and done, it was she herself who had first given him the hint that Ariadne would make him a most excellent wife." And the good woman's prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter.

We have now brought our narrative to a conclusion. Some of our readers, perhaps, might wish us to enter fully into all the persecutions and sufferings which the Princess of Wales continued to endure, until the day of her death, at the hands of her inhuman and remorseless husband, but those are matters which can be perused in any impartial history, to which sources must we refer the inquirer for further information upon the subject. We have now done with the vile and profligate career of that injured princess's husband, and do not purpose to follow him in his misdeeds and debaucheries when he occupied the throne by the title of George IV. But inasmuch as there are incidents of the succeeding reigns which seem to furnish ample food for our pen, and to promise a renewed interest for the reader who is inclined to follow us through such investigation, we conclude our present narrative by inviting attention to a Third Series of the "Mysteries of the Court of London."

END OF VOLUME X.